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America the Dutiful

By Eric Holm

Tuesday, October 21, 2008 6:04 pm

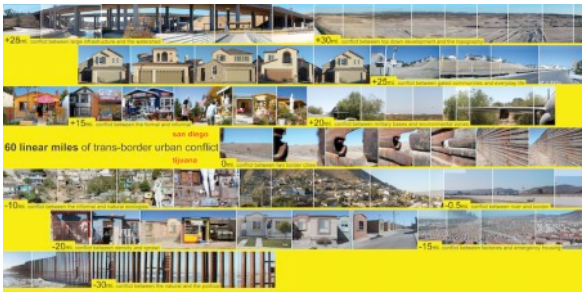
Give me your tired, your poor....

Words on the Statue of Liberty's pedestal come to mind while viewing this years' American contribution to the Architecture Biennale. While all the other countries interpreted the theme "Architecture Beyond Building" to mean the coolest projects from the coolest firms, the Americans chose to present 16 studios approaching architecture in unconventional ways for unconventional clients. *Into the Open, Positioning Practice* presents projects dealing with reclamation at many scales: city, public space, neighborhood, community, culture, home, dignity, play, identity, ecology, garbage, even animals.

An installation at the American Pavilion
(Photography: Eric Holm, unless otherwise noted)

The pavilion presents a breath of fresh air in the diversity and ingenuity of the projects proposed about helping people rather than egos.

You're greeted by Teddy Cruz's 89-foot long image of the actual borderline separating California from Mexico. Printed and stretched across the entire length of the building and courtyard, the image barrier allows entry only through slits cut in the middle; requiring you to literally cross the border into the United States. A filmstrip, superimposed above the fence, further delineates the border conditions 30 miles to the north and to the south, stretching from the poverty of Tijuana to the million dollar McMansions of San Diego. The effect is immediate when you see a 60-mile stretch transitioning from wealth to poverty along some of North America's most sought-after beachfront property. Highlighted are the huge discrepancies between goods and people coming in and going out of the U.S. and consequently the discrepancies in the two economies. The fence provides some further surprises as well: it has kept people from entering the pavilion or of confusing them as to whose pavilion it actually is. During the installation someone left an early-morning delivery destined for the Mexican Pavilion inside the fence thinking they had found Mexico. A storm that raged through opening weekend also helped the exhibit by dumping water at the foot of the image creating an actual barrier to those who tried to enter.



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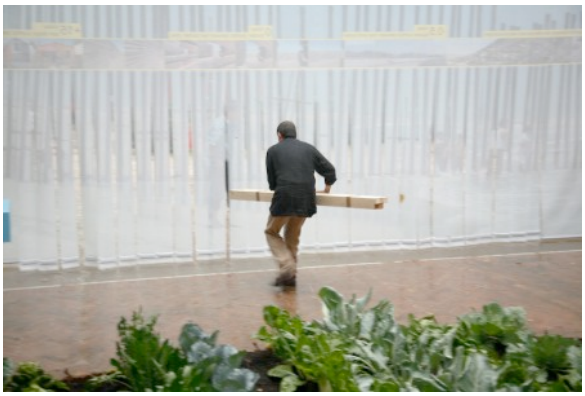
60 linear mile section, San Diego/ Tijuana, 2008
(Photo: Estodio Teddy Cruz)

Installation of Teddy Cruz's border fence

The temporary entrance to the American Pavilion

Biennale Curator Aaron Betsky (above) and Teddy Cruz (below) crossing the border



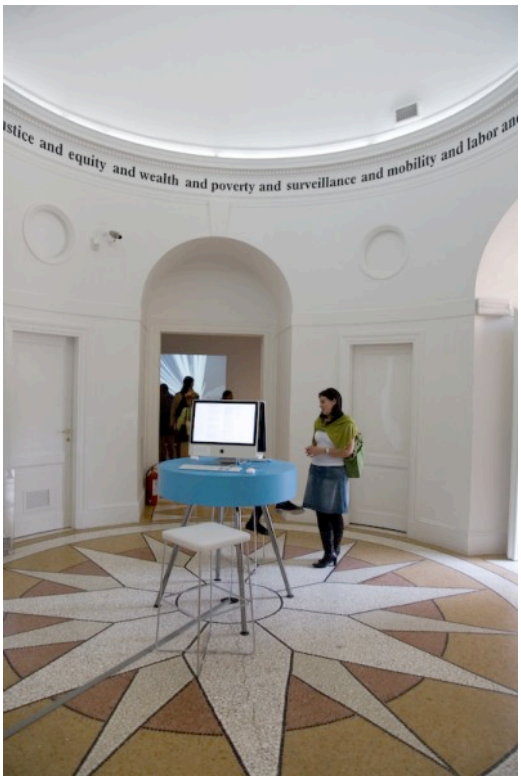
Inside, the pavilion throws another curveball with a large garden inspired by Alice Waters' Edible Schoolyard project in the San Francisco Bay Area. The famed Berkeley chef thought that students would benefit more from fresh foods than from tater tots and pizza lunches. Planting seasonal produce in an acre of former parking lot has grown to a full program that integrates the garden in all aspects of the children's education. While the garden is revolutionary in American cities where the connection to the soil and seasonal produce has faded from our collective memory, it is still a cognitive part of an Italian's culinary understanding as they are a good 20-30 years behind us at throwing away the good things and embracing junk food.

The original Edible Schoolyard garden at King Middle School in Berkeley, California (Photo: The Edible Schoolyard)

Pavilion Garden and co-curator Aaron Levy during installation

Edible Schoolyard garden and Border Fence from above and a child enjoying the landscape (below)

Next, the blogging station seems like an Apple advertisement. Placed under the oculus rotunda skylight of the American Pavilion, the machines take on a greater importance than the title and information about the exhibition; drawing people immediately to them instead of to the exhibition content. Italian visitors drool the cool the machines, saying they look like some sort alien life-form. They try their hand at computer hijacking so they can check their email. Seeing them pounding the keyboards I understand why nothing works in Italy. I should at this point note that I work in the pavilion (though I am trying to provide a fair assessment in this review) and have witnessed this technique from what must comprise at least 80% of Italian visitors.



The entrance and blogging station. Be sure to visit the web site and leave a comment. www.positioningpractice.us

Contributions from the International Center for Urban Ecology hardly explain their work which deals with depopulation and change within the urban landscape across several continents. The three separate videos for The Center for Land Use Interpretation explore how garbage moves through Los Angeles are confusing. Are you supposed to watch them together or one at a time? They're too slow to watch independently and too fast to watch together. You're left confused, rather than engaged in the shear monstrosity of our waste production. *The Architect as Developer* presentation from Smith and Others in San Diego represents one of the few firms actually building and developing and suggests some innovative approaches but the video falls short on information and the lack of a web site allows no opportunities for further development.

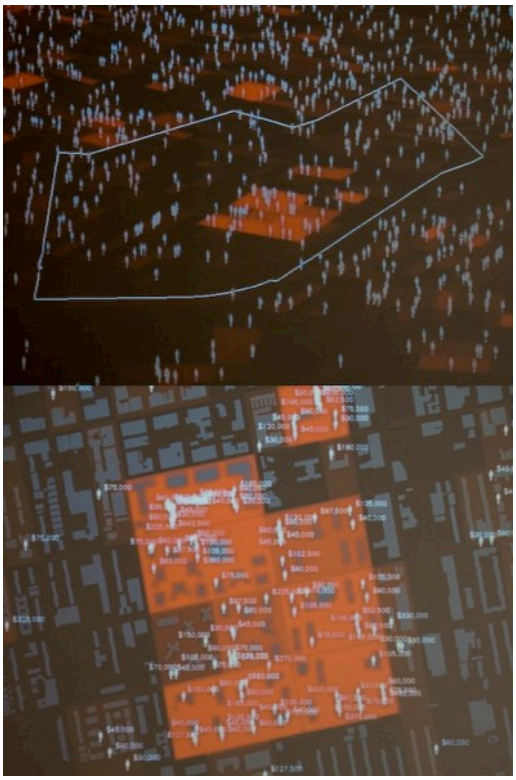
International Center for Urban Ecology's "New Silk Road" images

The Center of Land Use Interpretation- Post Consumed: The Landscape of Waste in Los Angeles, 2008

(Photo: CLUI)

Visitor watching the Smith and Others development model video

The projection for Spatial Information Design Lab entices but hides the punch-line until the end so you have to watch it a second time to understand the graphics from the beginning. This is not such a good thing, especially since the lab promises to convert statistical data into relevant graphical analysis. Some challenging questions are posed: mapping the birthplace of jail inmates from Brooklyn, they have been able to determine that in some cases prisoners come from the same city blocks or even same apartment buildings. In comparing the annual cost of incarceration of an inmate, the lab has determined that the cost of incarcerating those citizens exceeds a million dollars. What if that sum was invested in education?



A screen still of Spatial Information Design Lab's Million Dollar Blocks

It is no surprise to see Auburn University's Rural Studio work in this mix, including larger scale community buildings. With the $20,000 houses they present solutions that are within reach of low income families and their sleek dog shelter shows that even man's best friend deserves a comfortable place to lay his head. The dog shelter was built by court order for the Humane Society to house abandoned animals that have turned wild and threaten crops and farm animals. In an interesting twist, the Humane Society does not euthanize its animals and the judge requires euthanasia, barring the facility from opening. The curators hope that the exposure of the project in the Biennale will help persuade the judge to change his mind.

Rural Studio's $20,000 house models and animal shelter

In a brazen example of taking back your neighborhood, Detroit artist Tyree Guyton started The Heidelberg Project to combat the desolation of the street where he grew up. Armed with a paintbrush, Tyree covered a house in painted dots. Several hundred dots, dolls, vacuum cleaners, and other repurposed items later, The Heidelberg Project runs art projects in area schools and has transformed the entire street into a massive art environment of found materials. He has been both condemned by neighbors, critics, and city councils (which twice have bulldozed his creations) and awarded numerous civic service awards for his efforts to make something special out of a depressed situation. With over 275,000 visitors annually to neighborhood, Tyree is showing other communities that something can be done to change blighted areas.

The Heidelburg Project team and community
(Photo: The Heidelberg Project)

Suffering from a declining population for some years, many communities in Detroit struggle to maintain identities while residents flee in search of jobs elsewhere and their houses are abandoned. The Detroit Collaborative Design Center, in the University of Detroit Mercy School of Architecture, works with neighborhoods to heal the wounds of abandonment. With *Firebreak*, they propose projects to create an identity. Abandoned buildings are wrapped in plastic, fabric, signs, and even hay, serving as political motivators for government officials to act promptly in demolishing the buildings when neighborhood requests have been ignored. Their video — as well as the Heidelberg video — is the most informative of any presentations, though because of their breakneck speed you have to watch them two or three times to grasp the message.

Detroit Collaborative Design Center's Study models for abandoned building intervention projects

Hay House, *Detroit, Michigan, 2001*
(Photo: Detroit Collaborative Design Center)

Also struggling with community identity, the residents of Third Ward in Houston are fighting the gentrification of their neighborhoods. They began to reclaim their neighborhood and redevelop their own houses, public spaces, and facilities to develop an identity and block the developers from pricing them out of their homes. Perhaps the speculative communities of Arizona, Nevada, and Florida will need similar interventions as they quickly become ghost towns with inflated mortgages.

Project Row Houses *(above and below), Houston, Texas, 2003- Present*
(Photos: Project Row Houses)

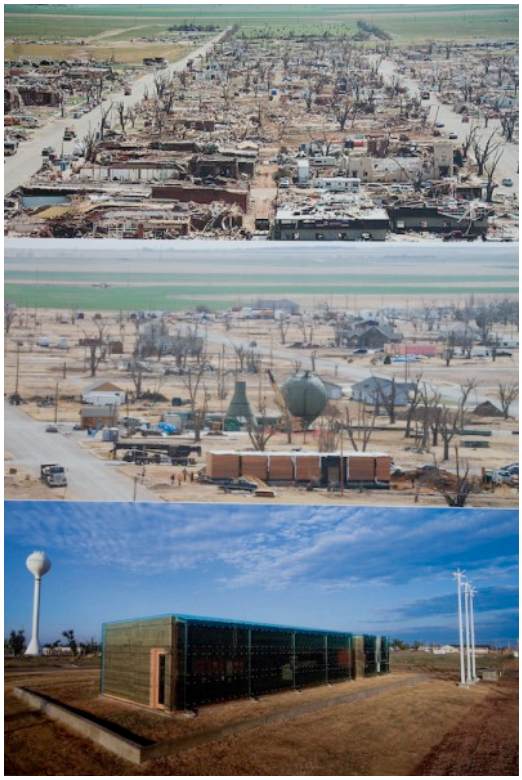
While some American communities struggle with their abandoned relics, others need only temporary shelters. Design Corps addresses the needs of migrant farm workers by building them bathroom facilities in labor camps and mobile prefabricated trailers to provide housing for workers during a harvest season, improving the living conditions and health conditions for many.

Migrant Bath House Prototype, Sampson County, North Carolina, 2003
(Photo: Design Corps)

Gans Studio views temporary shelters as infrastructure in a disaster situation. Their Roll Out Houses work to create structural column cores that can be situated to make a rainwater cistern or a kitchen and provide structure for a canopy or temporary roof while integrating solar cells to generate electricity off the grid. Structurally sound enough to allow a second level; they can evolve into permanent housing supports as rebuilding efforts begin. In theory, the design of these flat-pack elements that become buildings and can have multiple applications, from migrant workers to Native American reservations (as suggested in the exhibit) to disaster relief after a flood or hurricane. Unfortunately, the prototype does not resemble the proposed materials and the overall installation doesn't correlate with the notion of flat-pack delivery and quick installation. Its heavy, milled wooden bases and a specially formed cardboard canopy support do not meet the design intent. I imagine with more time to develop the exhibit, the prototype would closer resemble the renderings. That said, the makeshift shower from a hanging bag appears to have more water pressure than my apartment here in Venice so I can see some immediate benefits.

Gans Studio's diagram and rendering of the Roll Out House (above) and the prototype (below)
(Rendering: Gans Studio)

Also battling the forces of nature and disaster reconstruction is the work of Studio 804 from Kansas. A design/build program for students, they seek to find solutions to "forgotten, blighted, and environmentally challenged neighborhoods." In Greensburg, Kansas, they constructed a sustainable, pre-fabricated Cultural Center using reclaimed wood and funded entirely by efforts of graduate students. The town received this building as the first new building after nearly complete devastation by a tornado. As the first LEED Platinum building in Kansas, the Cultural Center is expected anchor a different approach to redevelopment.



Studio 804's Cultural Center in Greensburg, Kansas in the aftermath of the tornado

Jonathan Kirschenfeld Associates brings The Floating Pool to New York City, with the aim of bringing recreation to underserved communities. Commissioned by the Neptune Foundation, the public swimming facilities are inspired by the turn of the century bathhouses (as many as 15) that were anchored along the East and Hudson rivers. The Foundation wants to restore the waterfront as a vital recreation zone so the pool rests in the hull of a decommissioned cargo barge and is a self contained swimming pool facility with changing rooms, snack bar, bathrooms, showers and even a spray pool to recreate the experience of running through sprinklers. Donated to the Parks and Recreation Department the pool changes location every summer, serving poor communities, as well as attracting hipsters and young families, creating a gathering space that ignores socio-economic barriers.

The Floating Pool, Opening Reception, Brooklyn, July 2007
(Photo: Jonathan Kirschenfeld Associates)

The Center for Urban Pedagogy's Subsidized Landscape illustrates how housing subsidies work in the U.S. (or, worked a month ago). The model demonstrates how much government intervention controls housing growth through either direct aid and subsidies or through tax incentives and savings. It brings to light the enormously complex system of home loans and helps explain how tangled the web-that's now unwinding—was once woven.

The Center for Urban Pedagogy's "The Subsidized Landscape" model

Based in San Francisco, Rebar creates projects that try to reclaim public space or simply question its intent and purpose. Their Panhandle Bandshell explores the notion of public installation and asks if it can serve as both sculpture and space at the same time. Their performance space for Golden Gate Park was made of repurposed materials such as car hoods, water bottles, and French doors. The structure serves as a demonstration of innovative material uses and invitation to enliven public sphere through performance. This project, as well as their PARKcycle or PARK(ing) Day, shows a renegade approach to reclaiming our privatized environment for the public realm.

Panhandle Bandshell Flyout, San Francisco, California 2008
(Photo: Rebar)

Rebar's Bandshell graphic illustration demonstrating the components of the project
(Photo: Rebar)

The challenge with the American exhibit at the Biennale is trying to comprehend all 16 firms represented here. Editing would have helped. Fewer projects would allow more time and space to show and study this new, 21st century design activism. In any case, this pavilion speaks the most strongly to the theme of "Architecture Beyond Building".

American Pavilion Commissioner (and The Architect's Newspaper's editor-in-chief) William Menking taking advantage of the comfortable couch for a quick nap after a long day of pavilion openings

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