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Borderwall as Architecture, and Everything Else Too

In March 2017, Christopher Hawthorne, then chief architecture critic for the *Los Angeles Times*, published remarks by a young American architecture firm that had been unwittingly embroiled in a controversy over Trump’s border wall.

[1] Hawthorne led his article by linking “Trump’s wall” with the one in Berlin and castigating the large design and engineering firms that had answered the federal government’s request for qualifications—Bechtel, AECOM, Boeing, etc. But his ire was more acutely focused on JuneJuly, a small two-person design practice that stuck out from the usual corporate firms. [2] Hawthorne criticized not only their interest in the wall but their seemingly too academic rationale for undertaking the RFQ, including the “‘post-national’ point of view” the two had espoused.

For those willing to dig a bit deeper into the non-controversy, it appears JuneJuly, led by Jake Matatyaou and Kyle Hovenkotter, were not guilty of trying to build Trump’s wall but of failing to tone down their abstract ideas and present them in prose straightforward enough for Hawthorne to understand. [3] What happened was this: Matatyaou and Hovenkotter signed up to receive information from the federal government, information that could lead to a border wall design scheme—real, abstract, or otherwise. JuneJuly had signed up to receive a request for qualifications and then got lost in their own “rhetorical quicksand,” according to Hawthorne. Critic Paul Goldberger was evidently so offended he tweeted out the fact that both held teaching positions at prestigious universities (including Columbia University GSAPP, the publisher of this journal). [4] Comments on Matatyaou’s and Hovenkotter’s individual and office social media accounts quickly devolved from there.

I bring up the matter not to clarify what happened to JuneJuly but to hold up how the incident, one that involved architects attempting to obtain construction specs, data, and information—standard practice in both design and research—provoked a week’s worth of public rage for those who match their righteous indignation with low information. Certainly, a couple of phone calls could have ironed it out. But Matatyaou and Hovenkotter had touched a sensitive nerve, and this was just the latest in a series of border skirmishes that have broken out in the architectural profession, with its insatiable, paranoid obsession with the US–Mexico border wall. In his book *Borderwall as Architecture: A Manifesto for the U.S.–Mexico Boundary*, author Ronald Rael recalls another such moment—when, in 2006, the *New York Times* asked prominent

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[1] Christopher Hawthorne, “For Architects, Trump’s Wall Reveals as Much as It Promises to Close Off,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 16, 2018, [link](#).

[2] Hawthorne claims JuneJuly was “signing up to build a wall that is far more about fear-mongering than national security,” a rhetorical sleight of hand that makes their transgression appear far more substantive than simply adding their names to a list of firms receiving detailed design information.

[3] Full disclosure: Matatyaou was an early editor for my book.

[4] Paul Goldberger, Twitter post, March 2, 2017, 6:06 pm, [link](#).

architects to redesign the wall. Rael quotes Ricardo Scofidio, who responded, “It’s a silly thing to design, a conundrum. You might as well leave it to security and engineers.” [5] The quote is worth remembering, as it might still be architecture’s best response to the wall. If there was ever a time that architecture should cede some ground to the technocrats and engineers, Scofidio seemed to say, this would be it.

And then there was the “Building the Border Wall?” competition—the title’s question mark was added after broad online criticism—sponsored by the Third Mind Foundation. ArchDaily was so inundated with comments of protest that it pulled the competition from its site listings. Many firms and students boycotted, yet the competition limped to completion. It received 152 entries and announced winners on January 20, 2017, President Trump’s Inauguration Day. [6] You might be excused for having missed it. Rael wrote a more nuanced response to the competition in the *Architect’s Newspaper*, neither condemning the organizers to the Twitter trolls nor supporting its mission. The wall, Rael suggested, “could be reimagined not only as a security measure, but also as a productive infrastructure that contributes positively to a borderland ecosystem, breaking the cycle of violence from where it comes.” [7]

It was with this brief that Rael and his design partner Virginia San Fratello submitted ideas to the “WPA 2.0: Working Public Architecture” competition hosted by UCLA’s CityLAB in 2009. Taking advantage of the infrastructural possibility spurred by then-president Barack Obama’s stimulus bill, the competition asked architects for “innovative, implementable proposals that place infrastructure at the heart of rebuilding our cities during this next era of metropolitan recovery.” [8] Rael San Fratello’s submission, honored as one of the competition’s finalists, was titled “Border Wall as Infrastructure,” and their entry provides the principal content for *Borderwall as Architecture*. The book expands on the border-wall-as-infrastructure idea to include new thoughts and design schemes that operate somewhere between serious architectural proposals, whimsical possibilities, and liberal-state investments. According to the back cover, the book is both “an artistic and intellectual hand grenade” and a “protest against the wall and a projection about its future.” In light of where the wall has recently stood—as a political bellwether and irredeemable architectural fantasy—one of the primary questions foregrounding this book is what exactly is the point of addressing the potential border wall as a design project? If the options are either making moves toward an actual proposal (and thus getting harangued by the Twitterverse, including the likes of Hawthorne and Goldberg) or presenting knowingly impossible ideas that risk irrelevance, then why bother?

Upon reading the *Borderwall as Architecture*, it is hard to tell what technique—anger or indifference—should be deployed in reviewing the book and the many projects it proposes. Presented as a series of *recuerdos* (a Spanish term for “souvenirs” that Rael expands to include anything from facts to drawings, renderings, proposals, and models of existing and proposed wall conditions), Rael presents the wall not as a simple securitized object but as a critical facet of life cutting through communities and the desert—both of which would prefer the wall not exist. Rael is operating with the assumption that the border itself is not a wall, nor is it even a line. Rather it is what Chicana queer and cultural theorist Gloria Anzaldúa calls a “borderland,” a vague and “unde-

[5] Quoted in Ronald Rael, *Borderwall as Architecture: A Manifesto for the U.S.–Mexico Boundary* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017), 16.

[6] “Winners Will Be Announced on Presidential Inauguration Day, January 20, 2017,” Building the Border Wall?, [link](#).

[7] Ronald Rael, “Designing the Border Wall?” *Architect’s Newspaper*, March 18, 2016, [link](#).

[8] “About WPA 2.0,” WPA 2.0, [link](#).

terminated place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary”; a space of “constant transition” maintained and governed by race, nationalism, and difference. [9] The book includes contributions from planner and geographer Michael Dear, writer Marcello Di Cintio, and transborder scholar Norma Iglesias-Prieto, all people who have spent a lot of time and energy thinking about the border, how it came to be, how it is materialized, and what it means. A foreword is provided by architect and urbanist Teddy Cruz in which he describes the wall as a type of public object (or a lost public object), one that now “only exacerbates insecurity” and the “stupid logics of division.” [10]

But the bulk of the book is made up of the *recuerdos*. About half to two-thirds of them are what we might call facts, observations, and anecdotes, with the remainder being proposals for new walls or wall typologies. In format, *Borderwall as Architecture* is a typological survey of border spaces and events. Rael presents different means by which the wall is bypassed via tunnels, catapults, and bridges. He describes ways in which the wall can be subverted through commerce (selling food through it or sharing a meal across it) and human interaction (playing volleyball games over it, offering communion between its bars). And he describes many different and important issues surrounding the wall and its policing, including the use of eminent domain to build it, environmental concerns during and after its construction, and the wall’s disruptive geographic imprint, which segregates communities and individuals from their families, friends, health care, jobs, and education.

The remainder of the book is made up of Rael’s new border wall proposals, often working in conjunction with an existing typology or use, and presenting it in new ways. The self-imposed metrics set up to guide the design process are: 1) All walls are common walls, meaning that at least two parties must agree to make any changes on the wall; 2) All walls are attractors, meaning the wall should bring people together; and 3) All walls are temporary, noting that a “post-borderwall” scenario should be made more “valuable” by the proposal. The proposals exist on a spectrum from saccharine (“what if the wall itself were the world’s largest xylophone, played by thousands of people across the two countries,” or a wall thread through with teeter-totters) to more socially con-

[9] Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 2007), 25.

[10] Teddy Cruz, “Borderwalls as Public Space?” in *Borderwall as Architecture: A Manifesto for the U.S.–Mexico Boundary*, ed. Ronald Rael (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017), xii–xiii.



Speculative *recuerdos*. Photograph by Brittany Hosea-Small. © 2018 UC Regents, all rights reserved.

structive (border as a shared library, as theater, as sports field) to the outright plausible (wall as water treatment center, as solar array). [11]

“Solar Wall,” part of Rael’s original WPA 2.0 competition entry, suggests the wall could be a type of solar array, or, at the very least, it could be topped with solar panels. Rael presents the Solar Wall as a response to pizza magnate and one-time Republican presidential candidate Herman Cain’s suggestion that the wall be made of deadly electric fencing. Rael does not mention that current Republican president Donald Trump has also suggested adorning his “big beautiful” wall with solar capabilities. (In Rael’s defense, Trump’s election occurred during the production of his book, and every proposal could not be cross-checked against whatever Trump had been saying at the time.) Rael considers the solar panel wall a solid investment that could produce both energy and jobs for nearby communities. In that sense, the wall-as-service-provider is a specter of the contemporary liberal state, which rules through violence while selling economic prosperity and individual freedom. Trump has been using precisely the same rhetoric for his own proposed solar wall, much to the chagrin of budget crunchers and energy scientists. [12]

Many of Rael’s other projects are presented in similar fashion. The “Hot Water Wall” will provide locals with hot water. The “Wastewater Treatment Wall” will perform as named. And the “Life Safety Beacon” will provide water and electricity for wayward wildlife and border crossers. Some of the projects invert the sinister logics of the current wall’s design, such as the “Cactus Wall,” which alludes to the use of natural landscapes to create impassable barriers. Funneling migrants toward more dangerous landscapes is a key design criterion for the current border, a fact made explicit in a 1997 report published by the US Government Accountability Office. The report acknowledged success in border policy, in part, through shifting “the flow of illegal alien entries from the most frequent routes (generally through urban areas) to more remote areas.”

[13] Results of this design feature are told in horrifying detail by anthropologist Jason De León in his archaeological study of the remains of migrants who died as they were forced to traverse the most dangerous natural landscapes of the US–Mexico border region. [14]

Rael’s most architecturally specific and promising proposal is “House Divided,” which poses the question, “What if one home was constructed with the border wall running through it?” At points where the wall is not solid (as is most of the current border fencing), “House Divided” shows fencing or bollards cutting through a living or dining room, or, in clear reference to Peter Eisenman, a bed. Families would be together but separated, intimate yet divided. The project uses the domestic home to show how the wall exerts violence at a subjective level. The border really does cut families in two, and “House Divided” presents a mode for architecture to both illustrate the recursive logic of the geometric barrier and frame it within a domestic typology that can be read in all of its complex relations.

Other projects present the wall as a type of public space that should be opened to cross-border communities. “The Swing Wall” remakes sections of the wall into large swings, and the “Field of Dreams” bends the border fencing into a baseball enclosure, complete with choreographed openings to get the competing teams on the field. There is an existing precedent for these type of spaces—Friendship Park, which straddles San Diego and Tijuana. But as Norma Iglesias-Prieto writes in her included essay, the park is so regulated

[11] See “Xylophobia,” 81; “Teeter-Totter Wall,” 105; “Library Wall,” 88; “Theater Wall,” 92; “Field of Dreams,” 100; “Wastewater Treatment Wall,” 60; “Solar Wall,” 114; in Rael, *Borderwall as Architecture*.

[12] Ruairi Arrieta-Kenna, “Donald Trump’s Plan to Build a Solar Border Wall, Explained with Math,” *Vox*, July 20, 2017, [link](#).

[13] US Government Accountability Office, *ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION Southwest Border Strategy Results Inconclusive; More Evaluation Needed*, GAO/GGD-98-21 (Washington, DC: Government Accountability Office, 1997), 67.

[14] For more, see Jason De León, *Land of Open Graves: Living and Dying on the Migrant Trail* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2015).

by the Border Patrol and US authorities that it functions more like a prison waiting room. “Physical contact with individuals in Mexico is not permitted,” Iglesias-Prieto writes. This fact haunts many proposals throughout the book. How should readers imagine a park-like structure cutting into or through the border when the existing park-like structures, such as the Friendship Park (which surely warrants neither word in its name as presently managed), have been militarized and regulated beyond use?

Here, maybe it’s a good time to address the term “wall.” Of the many barriers used for US–Mexico boundary fortifications, very little is, in fact, a wall—or at least a wall in the Trumpian sense. More often, the Border Patrol, Immigration and Nationalization Services, and the Department of Homeland Security refer to whatever is dividing the United States and Mexico as a boundary fence. Rael does mention this but seems to reinscribe the spectacular nature of the border wall that is frustratingly pervasive throughout architectural and political discourse. Wendy Brown, in *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty*, her oft-quoted book concerning contemporary border walls, calls this phenomenon an *image* of the sovereign state. An image that projects “jurisdictional power and an aura of the bounded and secure nation.” [15] The wall, for Brown, is a powerful instantiation and mediatic creation that articulates certain forms of global, sovereign power when such power is under threat and widely challenged. This, of course, is why Donald Trump is so drawn to the wall. While white supremacy, narcissism, and misogyny are the only political positions Trump has consistently claimed over the past thirty years, it is the wall that has become his literal rallying cry and the physical object to which he pins his otherwise unseeable political aspirations.

[15] Wendy Brown, *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty* (Brooklyn: Zone Books, 2001), 21, 25.

Everyone, it seems, agrees that “the wall,” while being a very real site of conflict, violence, and racism, is also a construction of racial nationalism and American mythology. And it is the spectacularized wall, which cuts across the political and racial landscape as much as it does the desert, that goes unchallenged by Rael or his project(s). As object *and* image, as spatio-political construct that surely must continue to exist within the terms established by American nationalism and patriotic securitization, the wall persists, existentially unchallenged, throughout the text and the projects. The terms of discourse are not questioned, and the projects react within a wall+ programmatic frame. The focus of the projects is not *what could the border be? Or how can we think of a world without walls?* but rather, *what else can walls offer while still conforming to the securitization strategies of the state, and even within the violent nationalism of current political discourses?* The violence embedded in the southern boundary is acknowledged explicitly by Rael when he quotes Noam Chomsky, saying that the border between the United States and Mexico, like all other borders, “was established by violence—and its architecture is the architecture of violence.” [16] Does a border wall that produces water or energy, for example, alleviate this foundational violence that Chomsky describes and Rael acknowledges?

[16] Rael, *Borderwall as Architecture*, 17.

Mitigation of violence, however, is not one of the key metrics by which Rael has created these projects. Instead, he claims humor as one of the vehicles for “polemicizing an architecture fraught with controversy.” [17] But what is the humor of a border wall made into, or out of, a xylophone? Or a teeter-totter? A type of gallows humor, I suppose. But I might offer that it is

[17] Rael, *Borderwall as Architecture*, 2.

irony, not humor, that drives these proposals. Rael claims the wall itself is an ironic object, that it is fundamentally meant to divide but has always brought people together in “remarkable ways.” [18] That may be so, but the border wall’s power to bring together can only be registered in relation to its power to divide.

[18] Rael, *Borderwall as Architecture*, 5.

In a now-famous essay dissecting the ways that television, fiction writing, and therefore American culture uses irony as a means to avoid real critical engagement and stake-claiming, David Foster Wallace offers a few important aspects of irony’s hegemony in cultural production. For Wallace, the problem with irony is not that it is critical but that it moves beyond criticality to cynicism. Although irony can be entertaining, Wallace warns, it is ultimately “critical and destructive, a ground-clearing” and perhaps more importantly, “singularly unuseful when it comes to constructing anything to replace the hypocrisies it debunks.” [19]

[19] David Foster Wallace, “*E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction*,” *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, vol. 13, no. 2 (Summer 1993): 183.

And so, when perusing Rael’s many proposals to replace or modify the border wall, he leads the project descriptions with what-ifs that beg for some form of suspended reality. These “what ifs” or “imagine ifs”—alternative facts, you might call them—most often leave the reader spiraling into all the reasons why not. In reading across Rael’s projects, it is unclear whether the proposals are making a claim on the future, or even on architecture’s ability to address issues surrounding the wall. Understood as ironic, architectural commentary, *Borderwall as Architecture* feels frustratingly stuck in an abstracted limbo unable to break into critical discourse.

A second aspect of irony that Wallace points out is its rapacious capacity to offer criticism and ask questions, coupled with its refusal to make even the slightest attempt at providing meaning: “How very *banal* to ask me what I mean.” [20] What would it mean to have a solar wall? Or a wall that forms baseball diamonds? For one thing, it would mean a radical shift in the defense strategies of the United States. And it would likely mean a change in our relationship to global neoliberalism and the violent race-making politics it produces—all of which demand smart responses in spatial thinking.

[20] Wallace, “*E Unibus Pluram*,” 184.

Donald Trump is a profoundly unironic person. He does not speak in coded language and does not narrate in metaphor. He does not do irony (for that matter, nor does he do humor). During his presidency, the racism and aggression once spoken in the nuanced tones of dog-whistle politics has been amplified to a clarion call (or rebel yell) we all now hear with crystalline clarity. Architecture, it would seem, does have the tools and language necessary to answer this bellicose rhetoric. But in order to do so, it must produce better and—critically—more legible answers to our shared problems than BUILD! THE! WALL!

By pointing toward Rael’s latent irony, I do not intend to say that each project, taken in isolation, is presented as an ironic take on border design and politics. Rather, the project as a whole is an exercise in ironic design and architectural practice. A boilerplate definition of irony is to express one position when you really mean the opposite. All evidence points to the fact that Rael does not believe a wall can or ever will fully serve border communities or the nation as a whole. And yet, there are dozens of walls presented here. To ask an ironic question: what would really happen if Trump called and offered Rael a design job for the southern border?

Wallace’s essay was published in 1993, and its title, “*E Unibus Pluram*” (“out of one, many”) was taken from a 1986 text written by architectural critic Michael Sorkin titled “Faking It.” [21] Sorkin, and later Wallace, were writing about the power of television to invert the sacred motto of the United States, *e pluribus unum* (“out of many, one”). Specifically, they were critiquing the power of technology to break the social body into individuals and questioning what happens when culture and politics become acts of individual consumption. Donald Trump, our made-from-TV president, is a master of deploying the logic of individuation for his own financial and political benefit. The president keenly understands the power of creating divisions among the public and addressing the nation as individuals, presenting American life as a zero-sum competition for whatever happens to trickle down. The US–Mexico border wall is only the most spectacular version of his politics of narcissistic individuality.

Sorkin, on the other hand, has been writing against walls for decades. In an open letter begging the architecture profession to band together in defiance of AIA president Robert Ivy’s tone-deaf statement offering the profession to Trump’s construction fantasies, Sorkin concludes, “Let us not be complicit in building Trump’s wall but band together to take it down!” [22]

[21] Michael Sorkin, “Faking It,” in *Watching Television: A Pantheon Guide to Popular Culture*, ed. Todd Gitlin (New York: Pantheon Books 1986), 162–182.

[22] “‘Trump Presidency Represents a Clear Danger to Many Values of Our Profession’ Says Michael Sorkin,” World Architecture Community, November 15, 2016, [link](#).