

# The Revolting Door

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*Before I built a wall I'd ask to know  
What I was walling in or walling out,  
And to whom I was like to give offense.*

—Robert Frost<sup>1</sup>

My first encounter with the borderwall between the United States and Mexico came in the summer of 2003. I had moved away from New York after 9/11, and I was invited by the artist Marcos Ramírez ERRE to visit his studio in Tijuana. His directions were simple: “It’s the first building on the right just as you go through the revolting door.” Having grown up in the linguistic borderlands of a bilingual family, I found it equally plausible that Marcos was either making a shrewd commentary on the door that served as the pedestrian port of entry into Tijuana, or that he simply meant *revolving*.<sup>2</sup> The richness of the ambiguity stayed with me and led me to the idea that architecture—in this case a door in a wall—can be endowed with different meanings, either by accident or by design, and that architectural expression can be at the same time serious and humorous, and a powerful tool in polemicizing an architecture fraught with controversy.

That same summer, I met the architect Teddy Cruz and was introduced to his vision for design that transects the border. Fascinated by his approach of thinking perpendicular to the border, I became interested in the line of the border itself and the diversity of the landscapes it parallels. This eventually led to a journey to explore the borderlands in California, New Mexico, Arizona, and Texas, where my creative practice worked on several design projects in the Big Bend region—projects that always explored the ideas of political, cultural, and material dualities in design



Two Border Patrol officers attempt to keep a fugitive in the United States.

and architecture. At the same time my studio was exploring how to make buildings using mud and concrete (which we saw as conceptually parallel to the contrasts of poverty and wealth, Mexico and the United States, and tradition and contemporaneity,) we also looked at ways in which these material systems—and in many ways, the cultural values and economies of scale embodied by these materials—could be interwoven: two distinct elements working in concert. Some of these ideas culminated in a project entitled *Prada Marfa*, on which we collaborated with the artists Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset. Constructed near the U.S.-Mexico border along a desolate highway in the Chihuahuan desert, a faux Prada store, built of mud and containing the 2004 line of Prada shoes and purses, both epitomizes and exaggerates the cultural and geopolitical dichotomies of the borderlands.

During the construction of *Prada Marfa*, we often witnessed helicopters descending on the horizon to pick up migrants walking through the desert. In fact, during our first visit to the building site for the project, several Border Patrol vehicles blocked our passage and agents surrounded us, demanding to know what exactly what we were doing there.<sup>3</sup> The heightened security in the borderlands, in preparation for the imminent expansion of wall construction, further fueled our desire to consider how design could be a vehicle for addressing the politics of border security.

As a finalist in the WPA 2.0 International Competition, my creative studio was able to explore the possibilities for political expression through architectural design. The competition, organized by UCLA's cityLAB, was inspired by the Depression-era Work Projects Administration (WPA) and the 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. This stimulus bill (the largest investment in public works in the United States since the 1950s) dedicated \$150 billion to infrastructure, and designers were asked to envision a new legacy of publicly supported infrastructure—projects that would explore the value of infrastructure not only as an engineering endeavor but also as a robust design opportunity for strengthening communities and revitalizing cities.<sup>4</sup> Our entry, *Borderwall as Infrastructure*, sought to integrate water, renewable energy, and urban social infrastructure into the design for the borderwall and to challenge the very existence of the wall in its conception, function, and future. At that time, the design proposals suggested an intervention. Since the wall was well on its way to being constructed on a massive scale, the attempt was made to demand wall builders to be more concerned with the landscapes that were about to be divided by the wall, and we made that pitch to lawmakers in Washington, DC, with the proposals. The project was the catalyst for this book; however, this book no longer seeks to intervene in the wall's construction, but instead to consider its transformation—an expanded study on rethinking the existing wall by redesigning it into something that would exceed its sole purpose as a security infrastructure and ameliorate the wall's negative impacts and, perhaps through intervention, make positive contributions to the lives and landscapes of the borderlands.

The work compiled in this book continues the exploration through a collection of anecdotes, essays, models, drawings, stories, and speculations. In addition, short reactions are offered by border scholars that present intimate and diverse perspectives of the wall. This book is also a protest against the wall—a protest that employs the tools of the discipline of architecture manifested as a series of designs that challenge the intrinsic architectural element of a wall charged by its political context. The wall is a spatial device that has been inserted into the landscape, but with complete disregard for the richness, diversity, and complexities of the areas in which it was built and proposed. This book advocates for a reconsideration of the existing wall, both through design proposals inspired by people living along the border who see the wall as something to respond to in positive ways and through proposals that are hyperboles of actual scenarios that have taken and continue to take place as a consequence of the wall.

These propositions presume the somewhat ridiculous reality of nearly 700 miles of border fortification while suggesting that within this enormously expensive and extremely low-tech piece of security infrastructure lie opportunities for the residents of this landscape to intellectually, physically, and culturally transcend the wall through their creativity and resilience. This work is meant to be at once illuminating, serious, and satirical in order to expose the absurdity and the irony of a wall intended to divide but that has brought people and landscapes together in remarkable ways.

1. Robert Frost, "Mending Wall," *North of Boston* (London: David Nutt, 1914).
2. A revolving door in Spanish is *puerta revolvente*. *Revolvente* might easily be misinterpreted as a cognate for *revolting*, because the Spanish reflexive verb *revolver* also can refer to an upset (turning) stomach.
3. An expanded text on *Prada Marfa* can be found in Dominique Molon, Ronald Rael, Michael Elmgreen, and Ingar Dragset, *Prada Marfa* (Berlin: Walther König, 2007).
4. For more information about WPA 2.0, see About WPA 2.0, University of California, Los Angeles, <http://wpa2.aud.ucla.edu/info/index.php?/about/about/>.