

Advanced Studio VI: Two sides of the border
Spring 2018
Tatiana Bilbao
GSAPP at Columbia University

Syllabus
'The Mexican Dream: the remittance home'



Contemporary American society is, if not the promised idyllic melting pot, an incredibly diverse mix of nationalities, heritages, and identities. Even demographics that appear to be small percentiles are, in reality, groups numbering in millions of people. One such group, Mexican immigrants, has been at the center of the American political discourse since the spring of 2015 and peripherally relevant for decades before. Lost in a discourse that is often hijacked by hyperbole, conspiracy theories, and outright lies is the impact this group has not just in American society but in the Mexican economy.¹ Of the more than 11 million Mexican-born people in the U.S., a large percentage support families south of the border. According to the National Population Council of Mexico one in ten Mexican families depends of remittances. In many cases immigrants are only temporarily residing in the United States, saving up to improve their houses or build new ones. Culturally, this literally builds on the tradition of auto-construction which has been promoted in Mexico in widely disseminated publications since the mid-1930s at the beginning of the so-called “Mexican Miracle.” However, in this instance tastes and ideologies have become hybridized leading to the imposition of American cultural objects, spaces, and typologies into the Mexican landscape.

¹ “Beyond Smoke and Mirrors: Mexican Immigration in an Era of Economic Integration,” Douglas S. Massey, Jorge Durand, Nolan J. Malone, Russell Sage Foundation Publications, 2002

The field of auto construction manuals and catalogues lies in the same vein as the catalogue homes that are the product of standardized construction industry. At the dawn of the twentieth century as the America's living standards and purchasing power continued to increase — the product of the wealth created throughout the Industrial Revolution — alongside rapid urbanization led to the famed Sears Catalogue Homes. Designs were disseminated by catalogues where customers could fill out a mail-order purchase and a completed, standardized set of materials would arrive directly to the site. These homes themselves were not incredibly innovative designs, their popularity largely due to conveniences provided by technological advancements: standardized construction materials from farmed timber saved time and reduced material waste, a national railroad network enabled material shipment to any destination, and balloon framing techniques refined since the mid-nineteenth century allowed for small teams of unskilled laborers to quickly assemble constructions.

For cultural and economic reasons compounded with the lack of availability of standardized materials and qualified labor, this scenario of auto-construction in Mexico is unlikely to change even in the medium to long term. What has and will continue to change are the products themselves and the composition of the urban fabric imposed on the landscape. The famed “rebars of hope” and aspirations of the minimal, flat-roofed Modern constructions espoused by Juan O’Gorman’s school designs are in some instances giving way to gabled roofs, corniced patios, large front yards, and window millions.

We will be studying immigrants homes in Mexico that have arrive to one of the most large Mexican community growths in the last decade, Ulysses, Ka. Immigrants from Chihuahua, Durango and Michoacán and how they live.

Your task as a studio will be to design a project and to assemble a hybrid publication, somewhere between auto-construction manual and mail order catalogue that not only draws from the methodology of both of these types but from their cultural influences as well. This is done to the end of producing material that is useful for immigrants who have gone to the United States and are returning with changed tastes that project different ideals of how to live. How can American typologies — themselves descendants of Scandinavian cabins, Germanic barns, and, later, French hôtels and Italian villas— be translated to Mexican landscapes making use of local materials and local, rudimentary construction techniques. This will be guided by a very rigorous study of both the American home typology, particularly since Levittown and suburbanization and Mexican auto-construction manuals.

Of course, it would be irresponsible to insert such designs wholesale into the Mexican landscape – American suburbanization is ecologically unsustainable and the product of a different set of cultural traditions – so this task will involve the adaptation of typologies. Perhaps this designs stack and multiply units so that even while retaining the characteristics and ornamentation of American suburbs its organization lead provides a more urban environment. Maybe designs that seem like one volume are capable of incorporating a separate commerce program that can provide supplementary income to families, or, if located in rural

areas, perhaps the Palladian strategy of incorporating storage areas as outstretched arms of the main property could be repurposed in a more modest scale. Whatever the adaptations, the final design manuals should not only be grounded in the principles of real-world construction but should demonstrate inventive adaptations that are emblematic of the cultural hybridization these landscapes are undergoing.

Two Sides of the Border Studios Initiative

This studio will be part of the Two Sides of the Border studios 2018 that Tatiana Bilbao will be leading. (More info on the attachment)

Travel

The studio will travel to Mexico City and surroundings, making sure we visit at least two of the towns where our case study immigrants are from.

Work

Research (3 weeks)

Understanding Mexico-US Migration, remittances, economy and local cultures.

Deep analysis on traditional construction methods in Mexico and how they have changed throughout the years and local culture

Intense research in cultural exchanges of Mexican migrants living in the US and their relationship to their own town, family roots.

Translation (4 weeks)

Designing a model home or typology for business, church, monument, built with remittance money back in Mexico.

An analytic, conceptual model proposal (urban scale and individual scale)

A complete set of drawings for your scheme.

A collage that would express your vision

Mid-Term Review: Feb 23th, 2018

Manual (7 weeks)

Develop a manual for your model or typology to be delivered in form of a book.

Final presentation will include, full set of drawings, must include construction methods, sections and details, a handbook and a model.

Schedule

Class meets Mon-Thu from 1:30 pm to 6:30 pm

Tatiana Bilbao: TB

Jan 17 Lottery TB

Jan 18 First class TB

Jan 22 Students working on their own

Jan 25 TB

Jan 26 TB

Feb 1 Students working on their own

Feb 5 TA

Feb 8 TA
Feb 12 Students working on their own
Feb 15 Students working on their own
Feb 19 TB
Feb 20/21 optional individual reviews with TB
Feb 22 TA
Feb 23 Midterm Reviews TB TA
Feb 26 Students working on their own

Mar 1 TB
Mar 3/7 Students to travel to Mexico TB and TA attending
Mar 10/18 Spring Break
Mar 19 Students on their own
Mar 22 Skype individual session with TB and TA
Mar 26 TB
Mar 29 Students on their own

April 2 TB
April 5 TB on the morning
April 9 Students working on their own
April 12 TB
April 16 TA
April 19 TA
April 23 TB
April 24-25 optional individual reviews with TB
April 26 TB
April 30 Final Reviews TB TA