Immigrant Dream and Nightmare
Mexican Mobility in Perspective: Building Futures/Closing Pathways

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Mexican migration shapes the development and texture of the built environment; architecture plays an absolutely critical but often overlooked role in also shaping migrants' futures, past and present. This informal essay discusses how migration has ignited material change in Mexican towns and pueblos through remittance funded construction as a means to building aspirational futures; this is then briefly compared with how U.S. immigration policy and the private detention center industry has built dozens of immigrant detention centers, closing down pathways and futures for those incarcerated across Texas. The opening of futures and closing of pathways mirrors one dimension of Mexic-Arte Museum's current exhibit *Mexico, the Border and Beyond: Selections from the Juan Sandoval Collection*, and the section in the exhibition entitled *Immigrant Dreams and Nightmares*; my own work as a scholar is here woven with a few key pieces from the exhibit.

Often remittances are visualized as flows embedded in narratives about how remitting is a global strategy on the rise. Mexico is among the top four largest receivers of remittances in the world alongside China, India and the Philippines. The U.S.-Mexico migration corridor is one of the largest in the world and approximately 35 billion dollars was [sent] to Mexico in 2018 by Mexican nationals living in the U.S. But, as an architectural historian, rather than flow charts or network graphs I seek to understand the buildings and construction industries remittances produce. While allegedly a small percentage of remittances are spent on construction (most is daily ephemeral like food and medicine), such investment in new construction has a dramatic effect on the way that space is produced and places are experienced.

In addition to analyzing buildings, oral histories and ethnographic research in both the places remittances are sent from (often cities) as well as the places they are sent to illuminates how these places are experienced. What I call "the remittance landscape" in Mexico is, for many, the goal of migration and crossing the border. It is a landscape that holds symbolic and personal meaning.[1] Findings from Manual Gamio and his research team in the 1920s reminds us that remitting is not new, it is at least 100 years old.

For example, in a series of migrant portraits taken by Gamio's research team in Michoacán, Mexico, repatriated migrants posed in their U.S. "Sunday best" in front of a model-T Ford. The same car was used in all of the portraits, providing a photogenic symbol of American modernity as migrant success.[2] Indeed, Gamio records that one out of every three migrants in his study brought a car back with him or her to Mexico, leading to the construction of roads:

> The possession of automobiles is absolutely unheard of in the humble social class to which the immigrants generally belong. . . . Many sections of rural Mexico where the repatriated immigrant goes to colonize have no suitable automobile roads, and either there is no gasoline or else it is expensive or hard to get, with the result that automobiles are often useless. The good that results is that the possession of automobiles stimulates the owners to build roads, however poor these might be due to the humble circumstances of the owners. It would have been better had they brought in more buggies and carriages.[3]

The extent to which repatriated migrants actually built new roads is unknown. This quotation, however, is evidence that the newly acquired modern amenity—the car—caused migrants to perceive a deficiency in their built environment that they attempted to correct through collective action. Roads were one of the initial remittance spaces built in rural communities. Fewer than one-third of imported vehicles were trucks suited to rough roads and heavy work; over two-thirds were passenger cars.

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[1] See Lopez, Sarah Lynn, "The Remittance Landscape: Spaces of Migration in Rural Mexico and Urban USA," (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).
[2] An album of Gamio's photographs, *Fotografias diversas correspondientes a la colonia Acambaro,* is available at The Bancroft Library, UC Berkeley.
[3] Gamio, *Mexican Immigration,* 68.

In the Sandoval Collection, we see the way that cars, almost 100 years later, are embedded in representation of very divergent aspects of both Mexican and American life. In Maria Natividad's piece, entitled *1936 Ford*, the car conjures personal memories of both her grandfather and father who had classic cars. Painting the car against a blue sky on a "never-ending highway" is a way for Natividad to connect with her "Chicano culture."[4] Indeed, it is the same make, Ford, as the cars that are so famously depicted in the Gamio portraits. In Luis Jiménez's painting, *American Dream* from 1972, the car is meant as a symbol of "material wealth and privilege in American society;" while the caption reads that the "woman lies in an embrace" with the car, and the artist is referencing Greek and Olmec mythology where women are seduced by animals, here it is unclear if this is an embrace, a rape, or a tragic end to her life. Is the *American Dream* here born, or is it killed? As noted, the car is a symbol of wealth and privilege and "Americans are obsessed with their cars" but it is also a central trope in Chicano and Latinx art, and Mexicans are "obsessed with their cars."[5] Through remittances, we can understand that acquiring a car has been one of the goals of migration since the 1920s.

The other material goal of migration is the house. Alongside Manuel Gamio, economist Paul Taylor also studied Jalisco in the 1920s and 30s. He notes, some migrants were interested in building a home in the "American style," but this desire was quickly set aside by the logistical and practical difficulties of doing so. In Arandas, Jalisco, Taylor records a return migrant's musings regarding a new home: "I would like to have a house in American style. . . . But . . . here we build thick so no bullet can come through, and no windows, so when the door is shut, no one can come."[6] My study retraced the steps of Paul Taylor and Manuel Gamio and recorded a different story.

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[4] Maria Natividad's piece, entitled *1936 Ford, https://sandoval.mam.yourcultureconnect.com/e/immigrant-dream-and-nightmare*
[5] Luis Jiménez's painting, *American Dream*; https://sandoval.mam.yourcultureconnect.com/e/immigrant-dream-and-nightmare
[6] Taylor, *Spanish-Mexican Peasant Community,* 63.

Formally, the remittance house commands attention. Its material form merges local construction techniques with aspirational plans forged in the spaces of migration. The facade is the principal arbiter of a dynamic exchange between migrant desires and the traditional vernacular of the town. Classically-styled columns reinterpret the volumes and ornamental carving of Ionic and Corinthian orders; hand-sculpted detailing and expensive ornate metalwork allow home owners and builders to represent a diverse set of experiences; regional craftsmanship is combined with *estilo californiano* recessed yards, metal fences, carports, and picture windows; the dull gray of concrete and masonry is masked with brightly painted plaster, or molded to mimic wood siding. The homogeneous built fabrics of vernacular environments comprised of continuous unadorned adobe or fired brick facades and *teja* roofs stretching from one block corner to another, are broken by gaps or two-story walk-ups as migrants announce their return, or at least their continued investment, with updated materials and modern amenities.

We might ask, what is this architectural evidence of? What does migration do to cultural and societal identities, pride and cohesion? In another painting in the Sandoval Collection by Francisco Delgado entitled *Antropofagia: Radio Flyer* from 2014, we see the artist painting a visual metaphor for his life in El Paso. Inspired by the Brazilian poet Andrade's 1928 Manifesto, he reacts to the argument that colonized countries should ingest the culture of the colonizer and digest it in its own way. Delgado says this is "cultural cannibalism" whereby Chicanos "ingest American culture and make it their own."[7]

One-hundred years ago, Taylor recorded the voice of a leading merchant in Arandas:

> Every Mexican who goes, likes the United States better than Mexico. He gets a better life there than here. After 100 years, it will be good-bye to Mexico. I am afraid they will like America better than Mexico. We are making 'war' so they won't become Americanized.

[7] Francisco Delgado entitled *Antropofagia: Radio Flyer* from 2014; https://sandoval.mam.yourcultureconnect.com/e/immigrant-dream-and-nightmare

> They will not like the Mexican flag; they have no love of country, and that is a great danger to Mexico.[8]

In Delgado's painting, another vision than this merchant's alarm is offered, not a binary where one way of life must be chosen over another, and usually in relation to asymmetrical power dynamics, but an ingestion where colliding ways of life morph into something new. And yet, while there is empowerment in ingesting and transformation, but there is also deformation and distortion. The process of transformation here is illustrated as so much work—the man's very body is remade. Can people simultaneously experience both empowerment and loss?

This brings me to the costs of the remittance house, which is both about actualizing one's dream and living out the consequences of doing so.

PART II: Closing Pathways

While my research on remittance houses and landscapes is about aspirational architecture intended to ignite social change and secure futures, I have also researched the way that architecture (immigrant detention centers) can close down futures, and curtail dreams, turning the act of mobility, or the fact of living as an undocumented migrant into a nightmare.

Detention centers are technically "administrative" processing centers. This has been the case since the Geary Act of 1892, which established detention and deportation in the context of rising Chinese migration to the U.S. The Geary Act was an extension of the Chinese Exclusion

[8] Taylor, *Spanish-Mexican Peasant Community*, 54. In Gamio's study, an interviewee expresses the opposite sentiment: "I would rather cut my throat before changing my Mexican nationality. I prefer to lose with Mexico than to win with the United States. My country is before everything else and although it has been many years since I have gone back I am only waiting until conditions get better, until there is absolute peace before I go back. I haven't lost hope of spending my last days in my own country." See Gamio, "Notes Gathered."

Act, and it forced Chinese laborers to carry internal resident permit, failure led to detention and deportation. [9]

The detention center as an administrative center established in the 1890s remains today: "immigration proceedings and civil proceedings and immigrant detention is not punishment."[10] Overstaying a Visa or being in the U.S. without proper authorization is a civil issue, not a criminal one.[11] Yet, we have a strikingly punitive infrastructure of detention—which raises the question: can buildings themselves define the nature of punishment? And what is the work detention is doing?

Texas is (or at least was until very recently) the place that incarcerates more noncitizens than any other state in the Union. Indeed, the entire state is a staging ground for immobilization. Throughout most of the 20th century, Texas did not have dozens of detention centers. In 1970 the state had three publicly owned and operated detention facilities: Port Isabel, El Paso, Laredo. The El Paso detention center was built in the 1960s (replacing an older immigrant processing station in El Paso). In a newspaper article entitled "U.S. Detention Facility Almost Like Army Camp: Detainees Amazed at Fine Treatment," the Director of Immigration and Naturalization Services notes:

> the camp was built as inconspicuous as it could be…the absence of watchtowers and strict confinement measures are designed to make life easier to the deportee while in facility. The people detained here are not violent criminals. They merely are charged with being illegally in the U.S. and are awaiting investigation before being returned to Mexico, or whatever

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[9] For a full discussion, see Kelly Lyle Hernandez, *City of Inmates: Conquest, Rebellion, and the Rise of Human Caging in Los Angeles, 1771-1965*,

[10] Dora Schriro, Immigrant Detention Overview and Recommendations, Homeland Security, Immigration and Customs Enforcement, October 6, 2009, 2, www.ice.gov/doclib/about/offices/odpp/pdf/ice-detention-rpt.pdf.

[11] Kelly Lyle Hernandez's book, *City of Inmates: Conquest, Rebellion, and the Rise of Human Caging in Los Angeles, 1771-1965*, discusses Senator Coleman Blease's bill (D-S.C., 1925-31), enacted in 1929, which criminalized unauthorized border crossings for the first time, resulting in Texas's first prison built for migrants.
Today, unauthorized border crossing is a misdemeanor, and re-entry after deportation is a felony. Criminal charges can occur at the U.S.-Mexico boundary that do not apply to those already residing within the U.S.

country they are from. [12]

Constructed out of concrete, cinderblock and brick, four rectilinear dormitories housed up to 192 men each

The Port Isabel Service Processing Center was built in 1961 on an abandoned naval base 30 miles northeast of Brownsville. At the time, The Attorney General at the time noted: the "border situation is combined at Port Isabel as in no other place. Here, drug smuggling and human migrants could be intercepted, and repatriations performed." Port Isabel was chosen as an "ideal location" to build a large-scale "immigrant processing" due to the "closeness to Gulf, Florida and Cuban coasts and the Mexican border."[13] On 315 acres of land, INS had the capacity to detain from 400 to 685 persons daily.

Now, despite the newspaper headline of "fine treatment," these facilities were surrounded by 12-foot fencing with concertina wire. It is no surprise that Chicano activism was galvanized in the 1980s to fight against a myriad of injustices. And, here in this *1983 Political Art Calendar* by Malaquías Montoya, the imagery of prisons underscores the message of "no nos quedan nada que perder mas que nuestra miseria;"[14] we had nothing left to lose, only our misery.

Since the 1980s, things have gotten much worse. Key political and economic changes have contributed to this expansion. The 1996 legislation, the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act, greatly expanded the categories of immigrants who were deportable and subject to mandatory detention. Events on September 11th ignited a transformation of the INS into the Department of Homeland Security (which implemented and oversees ICE); funding increased for migration enforcement, and a language of terrorism was

[12] "U.S. Detention Facility Almost Like Army Camp: Detainees Amazed at Fine Treatment," *El Paso Herald Post*, June 17, 1969
[13] "Port Isabel Chosen for Patrol Academy," *Brownsville Herald*, July 12, 1961.
[14] 1983 Political Art Calendar by Malaquías Montoya; *1983 Political Art Calendar* by Malaquías Montoya

incorporated into agencies responsible for immigration proceedings. In tandem with these changes is also a recorded boom in private prison corporation lobbying efforts. Between 2004 and 2014, CCA and GEO Group spent 22 million dollars lobbying the government with regards to immigration issues; 10 million focused solely on Homeland Security appropriations.

In this period, we start to see congressional changes. For the first time in history, the Department of Homeland Securities Appropriations Act of 2004 allocated money to fund 8000 immigrant detention "beds." That number keeps increasing.

New facility construction relates to these legal and political changes. While in general immigration scholars and activists have spent time analyzing policy and politics, we must reflect on the fact that the buildings outlast current administrations and that building contracts, and building industry shape immigration enforcement and detention practices on the ground for years to come.

Today, Texas' landscape is sprinkled with dozens of detention centers, of which an estimated 75 percent are privately owned and operated by corporations like GeoGroup and CoreCivic that build warehouses for people. An absence of natural light (increasingly replaced by "borrowed light," where skylights and clerestories are used to channel indirect light in lieu of windows, harsh florescent lighting, increase in use of concrete floors, crude signage, non-overlapping circulation spaces, caged rooms that replace time outdoors and solitary confinement units have become the norm.

The fast production of hardened detention space has in turn created its own crisis of detention. My hope is that by analyzing the accretion of these facilities over time, we can activate our spatial imagination and rethink in clear fashion what the relationships should be between people, the environment, and immigration policy.

Art and architecture shape experiences and communicate hope and despair. If our goal is to better understand the migrant experience, the Chicano experience, the borderland experience, what better sources of evidence do we have than the buildings that shape lives, and the imagines that we make to represent those lives?