



BORDER STORIES

Hyperborder: The Contemporary U.S.–Mexico Border and its Future
(Fernando Romero/LAR, Princeton Architectural Press, 2008, 320 pages; \$35.00, paper)

by Abby Bussel

THIS BOOK IS NOT EASY TO READ. AND THAT IS INEVITABLE because of its subject matter: the interdependence of Mexico and the United States, a condition exemplified by the “hyperactivity” of the border that ties and separates the two countries. Mexico City-based Fernando Romero and his colleagues at LAR (Laboratory of Architecture) have produced a research study that encompasses the “world’s longest contiguous international divide between a superpower and a developing nation.” Home to some 12 million people, 90 percent of whom live in 14 sister cities, the border is a complex place with far-reaching influences: crime, corruption, drugs, free trade, urbanization, resource scarcity, migration, death, and environmental degradation.

Like the issues themselves, the book is an overwhelming collection of acronyms, facts and figures, maps, charts, and graphs. The author’s desire to present a comprehensive portrait of two nations intertwined is ambitious, but some of the book’s impact is nearly lost in the diminutive type of its bright orange captions and the gray shades of its dense information graphics.

Wading through the visual gymnastics is worth the effort, however, because the issues under investigation are critical to the future of both countries, beginning with the upcoming presidential election in the United States. Tied to national security, human rights, and economics, among other matters, immigration has, of

course, become a central issue in the election season as well as a major challenge for Congress and the current administration. Pick up any newspaper these days and it will inevitably have an article on the subject—from the partisan war of words over drivers’ licenses for illegal immigrants to the 700 miles of border fence approved by the White House in 2006.

Before delving into detailed discussion of topics such as the inequitable repercussions of NAFTA for Mexican farmers trying to compete with federally subsidized agricultural giants in the United States, Romero offers brief but telling reports on other international borderlands. Some are contentious sites, as in the Middle East or the Demilitarized Zone between the two Koreas. Others are potential models of cooperative relationships such as the U.S.–Canadian border, especially the span between the northwestern states and British Columbia and Alberta, a bioregion known as Cascadia. Building on federal air-quality programs, the region, according to the author, has surpassed national government initiatives, implementing successful environmental programs and economic integration on the local level.

Beyond its dissection of border-patrol technologies and politics, narcotrafficking, transportation, migration and demographics, and the informal economic sector, among other timely topics, what really makes *Hyperborder* unique are the 38 “future scenarios” embedded within the larger research document. Unlike the proposals for future development often found in place-based studies, Romero envisions what the next several decades may hold in light of current policies, growth patterns, and environmental conditions—both negative and positive—in the arenas of public policy, trade, and economic and social reforms, among others.

In contrast to the minuscule infographics found elsewhere in the book, the type in these sections is literally writ large. And the tenor of the text becomes more sensational—like an anchor reading from a teleprompter on the evening news. One example, dated March 15, 2018, starts with this headline: “Panic in Mexico: The Nation Faces its Worst Economic Crisis in History As Pemex Announces Its Oil Reserves Are Completely Depleted.” The report that follows explains that the fields of the national oil monopoly have run dry, resulting in bank runs and street violence. Another scenario, dated November 28, 2026, reports on the black market that has developed since supplies of potable water dried

out along a portion of the Texas border two years earlier: “Lootings of Tugboats Shipping Drinking Water from Canada to the Juarez-El Paso Region Continue.” On a more positive note, a March 15, 2016, headline reads: “Illegal Immigration to the U.S. Expected to Decrease As Border Cities in the U.S. and

Mexico Are Granted Binational Status,” a development that means permits to work on either side of the border will be issued to anyone without a criminal record.

As the following decades unfold, we’ll know how prescient Romero may be. In the meantime, he offers his scenarios as a means “to redirect the way one conceptualizes the border, binational relations, and conditions affecting the planet in the years to come.” ★

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The Country Houses of John F. Staub, by Stephen Fox; Texas A&M University Press, 2007; 408 pages; \$75

The Green Braid: Towards an architecture of Ecology, Economy, and Equity, edited by Kim Tanzer and Rafael Longoria; Routledge, 2007; 374 pages; \$43.75