Por una mente sin límites
Por un mundo
Sin fronteras
ESCEULA SIN FRONTERAS, SCHOOL WITHOUT BORDERS

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PHOTOGRAPHS AND DRAWINGS BY THE AUTHOR

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What is the significance of a border? The lines that separate us are also a part of the framework that define who we are, how we build and where. A border can be as small in scale as a doorway, passing a person from one space into another, to the magnitude of an international boundary, a geopolitical line that determines culture, language, rights, and wealth. These boundaries with such a vast socioeconomic impact, have no predetermined physical manifestation. This begs the question, what could a border be? Or maybe more importantly, what should it be?

This project explores these questions by investigating the border between the United States and Mexico. This 1,954 mile border, comprised of land and a river, is one of the more contested, violent, and emotional places of transition in the world. Already a heavily structured line, the border that separates the United States from Mexico has become a visible line, dividing the first world from the third world. This project argues that this border is not just a problem of international politics, but an architectural one. If we are to build our borders, they should be built as places of shared infrastructure, an economic investment in creating a zone of shared culture and learning that can still be simultaneously a place of security.

Escuela sin fronteras, School without Borders, is a project that challenges the preconception of border, and introduces the possibility that a border is the first line in a larger framework that can define how we choose to live beside each other.
This project is an investigation of the border between the United States and Mexico. Asking the larger question of how a border is treated socially and physically, Esceula sin fronteras, School without borders is about redefining how we see borders. The condition of a border is one that reaches far beyond a singular line, so the architectural manifestation of a border should not simply be an extrusion of that line into space. Esceula sin Fronteras, School without Borders, explores the physical and cultural duality of a border condition, and seeks to provide an answer to how these places of immense opportunity can be treated.
This project is dedicated to my family. To my parents, Richard and Lorene and my sister Eileen for being a constant source of inspiration and support, and to my sister Susan who has similarly been a person that has supported and motivated me throughout my life, and who’s amazing work in education inspired this project.
I would like to thank my committee, Susan, Paul and Scott, for all of the time spent with me during this project. Thank you for pushing me to always pursue a higher goal and for all of your guidance. This project would not have happened without you.

I would like to thank Dr. Lupita Hightower for your insight and experience and sharing with me the amazing work you have done and are doing in both Mexico and the United States. You are an inspiration to everyone who meets you!

I would like to thank Victor Padres, for your support on my journey to the border. Without you my journey to Nogales would not have been nearly as rich or as successful.

Lastly, to my friends and my coworkers!
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“Before I built a wall I’d ask to know
What I was walling in or walling out”
-Robert Frost, Mending Wall
THE BORDER
Boy Child 2 months
“In the American imagination the border between the Mexico and the United States is a symbolic boundary between the United States and a threatening world. It is not just a border but the border.” (5)

The border between the United States and Mexico has a long and complex history. The current border did not begin its life where it currently resides. When Mexico first declared independence from Spain in 1821 the country included territory that today is California, Arizona, New Mexico and Texas. When Americans began to move to Mexico in the 1830s, they formed a short-lived independent republic, the Republic of Texas. The Texas Rangers, or the Frontier Battalion began to patrol the border between Texas and Mexico. The Mexican-American war which lasted from 1846 to 1848 ended with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which added an additional 525,000 square miles to the United States, and established the Rio Grande as the southern boundary of America. In 1911 the official line that divides the United States from Mexico was established, and by 1924 the United States had established a federally armed force dedicated to policing the border year-round, the Border Patrol. Over the next 100 years our approach to the border would not evolve, but it would expand greatly. (6)

The neighboring condition of Mexico and the United States has always been a case of economic disparity. The Mexican economy enjoyed a brief period of stable development from the 1950s to the 1970s, but political unrest in combination with large amounts of government spending and international financing, left the Mexican economy vulnerable to crisis. The World Debt Crisis of the 1980s stagnated the Mexican economy, and while transitioning to liberalized economic policies had a stabilizing effect, Mexico has not ever caught up to the United States standard of living. (7) Immigration to the United States increased in the 1990s, and as the situation south of the border became more violent, a litany of U.S. legislation aimed at militarizing the border took form.
1993, Operation Hold the Line: approved the construction of lighted barriers in El Paso.
1995, Operation Gatekeeper, approved the militarization of the border in California and allocated millions of dollars towards halting illegal immigration.
1996, Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigration Responsibility Act: approved the construction of fourteen miles of triple-layered wall near Tijuana and San Diego, today only nine miles have been completed.
2005, Real ID Act: waived any laws that would interfere with the construction of physical barriers.
2006, U.S. Secure Fence Act: funded over 700 miles of fortification at a cost of $16 million USD per mile. (This sum is approximately the same per mile cost as the New York City Highline.)
2008, a bill was passed in Congress that would have mandated the double-layering of all 725 miles of constructed border wall, the bill died in committee.

To date the total cost in USD that has been spent on the infrastructure that is built on our southern border is $49 billion dollars. (8)

This price would fund the construction of over 400 high-tech high schools in the Washington D.C. area.
THE BORDER

1,954 MILES

700 MILES
$49 BILLION

VEHICLE BARRIER
STEEL MESH
STEEL
DOUBLE WALL
NATURAL
The light blue area marks the ecological, and now political border zone. The horizontal hatch marks land that is owned by the United States federal government, with the light blue dash marking the adjacent state lines. The black dash defines the United States Border Patrol zones, and the affected border cities are called out in orange.

THE BORDER

"Can border regions be the laboratories to re-imagine citizenship beyond the nation state?" - Teddy Cruz

"America no longer has the tallest building, but could our planned Mexican borderwall be the world's longest building?" - Stephen Colbert
There are four primary types of wall construction; anti-climb, or pedestrian walls, anti-vehicle, hybrid walls which are intended to stop both pedestrian and vehicle flow, and levees, which stem the flow of water over the border.

The current infrastructure has also had the immediate effect of bisecting habitats. The environmental ramifications of border construction that does not take wildlife into account has resulted in a growing problem with endangered species and endangered habitats.
SITE
Situated in the beautiful hills of southern Arizona, the city of Nogales is split by the international border that separates the United States from Mexico. Highway 19, the main North-South access through Arizona runs directly into the city, and the port of entry serves the majority of people that are looking to make their way to Tuscon or Phoenix. The join city has an approximate population of 420,000 people, but with 400,000 of those residents living on the Mexican side of the border, the city is primarily Mexican. The language spoken there is Spanish.

The idea of exploring the concept of border in this place was interesting due to its size and situation. Nogales, being the primarily crossing point between Arizona and Sonora is not nearly the size of other border cities like El Paso / Juarez or San Diego / Tijuana, and interestingly maintains a singular cross-border city identity. Much of the population that lives in Nogales deals with crossing the border on a daily basis, and a great many of the families are separated by the current border infrastructure, and the immigration policies that built it. The death rate and illegal apprehensions in Arizona are very high, and it is this fact that sparked a curiosity in the primary crossing point.

Nogales is a place that no American citizen would say feels like a typical city in the United States, and the majority of the locals say that it is not a “real” Mexican city either. Nogales is truly a place of the border. The imposing corten metal wall that bisects Nogales creates a bizarre serpent in the landscape, as it rolls over the city’s incredible topography. The side of the city in Arizona is quiet, largely residential, and wide open. The activity buzzes around the wall, and ports of entry, one vehicular and two pedestrian, but it is a short walk from the main street out to the empty dirt roads where only the Border Patrol trucks can be seen rolling along, or just waiting. In these empty spaces, the wall has the feeling of an eerie landmark, a side wall to the landscape, the only signs of life being occasional litter and graffiti that is poking around from the other side of the wall. When one crosses at one of the pedestrian crossing points, there are only a few gates and turnstiles, none of which are manned. Next to a metal detector there is a folding table and sometimes a bored looking guard, other times no one at all. “Welcome to Mexico”.

SITE
Walking around the corner and into Mexico is like stepping into another world. Car horns and music blares, buildings, some looking much more worse for ware than anything in Arizona, are pressed up right to the wall. The streets directly adjacent to the wall are filled with tourist souvenir vendors, dentist shops and pharmacies. The crowded streets go on for miles, the density hardly ever thinning, the smells of food trucks and open air restaurants mixing with the exhaust from the nearly constant line of cars that waits to be let through the port of entry into the United States. One would think that they had been transported to an entirely different city if it weren’t for the wall that amputates the busy thoroughfares. Wandering among the streets, it is startling to turn a corner and suddenly see a wall. The side of the existing wall that faces Nogales, Mexico is covered in colorful graffiti. Crosses line the fence posts in bright colors that refuse to let the viewer gloss over them. Depictions of border guards chasing down migrants are placed in front of a line of painted candles, one candle on each 4” metal post, marching down the line of the border. Language cursing the United States and Trump is painted boldly amidst a field of painted handprints. And within all of that graffiti, the words “Por una mundo sin limites, por un mundo sin fronteras” is written in purple chalk, so small that a person would not ever see it unless they were standing inches away from the wall.

Nogales is the perfect laboratory to expand how a border should function, because the way it is functioning now, is cutting a city half.
Much of the population that is split by the international border are parents who have been separated from their children. So why couldn’t the border function as a school? With an international school in place families could make the decision to continue to live together, and still afford the children the opportunity to be educated in the United States and meet the requirement that students seeking immigration relief must be attending a U.S. school. (2) Or with kids living in Arizona and parents displaced in Mexico, a border school could provide an opportunity to meet and interact on a more regular basis, without the burden of having to wait for multiple hours to pass through border patrol and into one of the countries. Lastly, a school function on the border could be more than the educational opportunity of bringing two sides of the city together, but it would be an economic investment in shared infrastructure. It would be a facility that needs employees, that needs maintenance, that could be built by both countries and where both countries could provide goods and services to the benefit of both economies. A border does not have to merely be a line that divides, but it can be a gradient, a place of intermixing, transitioning, and growing.
NOGALES, ARIZONA
SANTA CRUZ COUNTY
POPULATION (2016) 20,008
ELEVATION 3,832

UNITED STATES
MEXICO

NOGALES, ARIZONA
SANTA CRUZ COUNTY
POPULATION (2016) 20,008
ELEVATION 3,832

UNITED STATES
MEXICO

HEROICA NOGALES
MUNICIPALITY OF NOGALES
SONORA
POPULATION (2010) 212,533

Al Mitchell Elementary School, 855 N. Bautista Drive
Lincoln Elementary School, 625 N. Tyler Ave
Challenger Elementary School, 901 E. Calle Mayer
Mary Welty Elementary School, 1050 W. Cimaron Street
Coronado Elementary School, 2301 N. Al Harrison Drive
RM Bracker Elementary School, 121 Camino Diaz Mandamientos

Wade Carpenter Middle School, 595 W. Kino Street
Desert Shadows Middle School, 340 Blvd. Del Rey David

Nogales High School, 1905 N. Apache Blvd.
ESCUELA SIN FRONTERAS
SCHOOL WITHOUT BORDERS
Esceula sin fronteras, School without Borders, is a middle school placed on the location of the international border line between the United States and Mexico. As a profound gesture of economic and domestic friendship, this international school transcends the border between Nogales, Arizona and Nogales, Sonora. Situated in the beautiful hills of Nogales, the building mirrors the dramatic topography of its site by employing two sets of levels. The building is two halves, North and south, situated around an open-air atrium that is entered from the sides. In this common corridor space, the levels interact with each other through various routes and means of circulation, creating an inhabitable void space where a twenty-three foot tall metal fence used to separate the international border. The E-series levels are situated on the lower U.S. side of the border and are programmed classroom and flexible study space. The M-series levels are situated on the higher Mexico side of the border, have the staff offices and are programmed with shared space including a library, media center, and cafeteria. Additional program spaces that emphasize this building’s unique situation include Immigration Services, Border Patrol, community learning spaces, and a detached gym with an international soccer field that stretches across the border. The border screening of students and parents takes place in an outdoor desert garden space, allowing the citizens of both countries to feel more comfortable as they pass through security together, from both sides of the border, blurring the boundaries of this geopolitical space. The school has two ports of entry, on either side of the building, the main one on the east side of the school for daily entrance and exit by all of the community members wishing to enter or leave; the secondary entrance is on the west side of the building is structured more for emergency exiting and servicing. Both buildings are entered from the border line, along the east and west side, emphasizing that there is no North / South distinction in this space of education and community. The building, and the ports of entry, are designed to continue to meet the security requirements demanded by the United States and Mexico to not allow illegal crossings to take place, but the way in which it functions, and the design of two sides playfully interacting with each other have created a place where the border is open, beautiful, alive, and inhabitable.
ESCEULA SIN FRONTERAS, SCHOOL WITHOUT BORDERS
ESCEULA SIN FRONTERAS, SCHOOL WITHOUT BORDERS
OVERALL SITE PLAN
The North elevation of the building employs a playful facade that is meant to emulate the way the buildings of Nogales dance along the topography. Built into the many hills, the view of Nogales, Sonora is a delightful tapestry of architecture. The North facade of the building, due to its orientation is able to utilize larger-format windows without as much risk of thermal gain as the southern arm of the school. These windows allow the classroom spaces to be washed in natural light and are operable, so the classrooms can enjoy the outside air.
The south elevation of the building has the same undulation as the North, but with a different purpose. The southern facade, feeling the full force of the sun has much smaller, windows, but does utilize the east and west walls of each space to give the interior as much natural light as possible. The southern portion of the building is also built into the topography, keeping these spaces cooler.
PORTS OF ENTRY
POE West has the primary function of being an additional means of egress from the building. Being at the lowest natural point of the site, the school is accessed from the either set of stairs or the elevator. This space has outdoor classroom facilities, a place where deliveries for the school are received from either side of the border, and a drive lane for food trucks for any of the building's users who wish to buy lunch. The outdoor classroom spaces are primarily lab functions, one flexible lab, and the other a cooking classroom. Even though this is not the primary exit or entrance, Border patrol will have a screening station here.
POE East is the main entry into the building. Using the site's topography as a means of naturally funneling people into and out of the building, the POE east garden is comprised of a series of ramps that allow pedestrians to be screened at two entrance doors. One on the building POE east level, opening directly into the central corridor, and one on the M1 level with quick access to the Border Patrol suite. The POE area's primary function is to maintain security at the border that is currently required by both governments. But it is designed as an outdoor garden space, meant to soften the experience of being screened by law enforcement. This module, is the functional linchpin of the building concept, this garden allows the building to have open ends on either side, creating a border space, rather than line to be crossed.
The POE east level in the building is the manifestation of an inhabitable border space. This long corridor, shaded by the two sides of the building, is an active space filled with the users. It is not merely circulation space, but a place where people can meet or sit and observe the function of the school during the day. With all three levels opening into this space the student creations would grace the walls and color the space, allowing the user to visually enjoy seeing all three grade levels at once.
On this level there is access to the Front Office and administration as well as the Border Patrol suite, where both countries would house the law enforcement they require for this building’s location. The detached gym is accessed from the other side of POE east, and is fitted with locker rooms for the students. The basketball / volleyball courts are available for community sporting events after school hours. The only other program space directly accessible from this level is the Library. The Library is the only space that has a wall which falls directly on the international line of the border.

This soaring, two story glass wall marks the exact spot where the United States and Mexico agreed one country ends and the other begins. Libraries have the ability to hold the past, present, and future in one space, they are and have been culturally significant throughout all of human history, and it is with this in mind that the North wall of the library falls exactly on the border. As the sun moves across the sky throughout the day and over the course of the year, the library wall will cast a shadow, using the architecture to display that within this space, the line of the border is constantly moving.
4 MINUTOS
50¢
A Todo MEXICO
No Incluye Telefonos Mobles
Llame con Monedas en este Telephone
LEVEL E1 AND M1
Level E1 is the sixth grade level. Being only four feet above the Port of Entry level, the classrooms open almost directly into the corridor space. This level is outfitted with four classrooms specifically designated to sixth graders, and the art room, which is used by all grade levels. The 6th grade locker area is adjacent to the Art Room on the west end, and there are tables set up for flexible study space on the east. In the more sheltered corridor behind the Front Office, there are smaller meeting tables for individual or more private conversations.
Level M1, the first level on the side of the building that is in Mexico, has a bay of offices for teachers and staff, as well as some conference areas. The Special Education classroom is also located on this level, where it is more directly accessible to the staff. The bathrooms are accessed on the M1 level, with the understanding that these rest rooms serve the E1 and M1 areas. The fire stair, and elevator are accessible on both sides from both E1 and M1. The Border Patrol suite, on the east has an access from this level from both the inside and the outside. In the detached gym, Level M1 aligns with the mezzanine level where there is a more flexible sport area, the mezzanine is set up for things like ping pong, yoga or a martial arts area.
LEVEL E2 AND M2
The E2 level has the seventh grade classrooms and some shared 7th and 8th grade labs. This level also has the music room, equipped for band, orchestra, and choir, this space is located at the far west end of the building. The soccer field, accessible from the gym, and from the ground level in Mexico is visible at this level.
The M2 level, one half level up from the E2 level, and connected to E2 with a series of four ramps has additional office space as well as two additional program elements, an Immigration Law Library, and an Immigration Suite. Immigration councilors and lawyers have this suite available to work at the school, or be used as a meeting place in this international facility. Located directly above the Library is the Media center, which is primarily for student use, but is available to the community during the weekend. The Media center can be accessed directly from the Library below.
LEVEL E3 AND M3
Level E3 is the top level of classrooms and is the eighth grade floor. This space has more flexible study space than the other floors due to the higher grade levels having more ability to focus and work independently.
Level M3 is the very top level of the building, connected with ramps to the E3 level and built out with community space classrooms and flexible study space. The main program element on M3 is the cafeteria. While there are plenty of flexible spaces throughout the school where students and faculty can eat, this is the location of the kitchen and the main eating space.
The roof level can be accessed from the main stair tower. Being that Nogales has such extreme topography, the roof was designed as a visible element for the city. The classroom spaces are all fit out with green roof technology, accessible from concrete paver walkways.
SOCCER FIELD
CONSTRUCTION
CONSTRUCTION
DIMENSION PLANS

UNITED STATES
MEXICO

port of entry west

ESTADOS UNIDOS
MÉXICO

puerto de entrada oeste
As a construction project, Escuela sin fronteras, School without Borders is a unique opportunity for both the United States and Mexico to invest in the building, playing to the strengths of each country. The building and construction sector in Mexico is highly influence by infrastructure and development programs out of the United States government. U.S. investment in Mexican National Infrastructure Program (PNI) projects is in the hundreds of billions of dollars. (1) The best opportunities for Mexican PNI projects and U.S. exports are in major infrastructure projects supported by both governments, most public projects in Mexico are developed and executed by both local and foreign investors.

Mexican construction techniques are different from the United States in that Mexico has a much larger unskilled labor force, as such the majority of projects are built with bricks and concrete, the traditional building materials in Mexico. The market opportunities for the United States are in specialized systems and raw materials that are hard to get in Mexico. Most projects that are being built on the border are utilizing raw materials from both countries.

“Opportunities for U.S. suppliers in both residential and non-residential construction/building include wooden windows, doors, flooring, and frames from sustainable woods; ecological paints, coverings and coatings; ecological concrete pipes for potable water and sewage; energy saving light bulbs; ecological pipes and fixtures for electrical applications; skylights; green-certified electrical devices and home appliances; permeable concrete; green roof systems and equipment; high-efficiency air conditioning systems and equipment; high-efficiency HVAC equipment for commercial buildings and hospitals; ecological water purification systems and devices; ecological indoor and outdoor furniture; natural insulation materials; ecological blocks and bricks; and insulation, acoustics, and fire retardant thermal protection materials.” (1)
Escuela sin fronteras, School without Borders is designed as a primarily concrete building. The labor force would be local. Systems from the United States include the green roof system, the large furniture systems such as the classroom furniture, and lab equipment. The mechanical and electrical systems for the conditioned spaces would come from the United States. Opportunities for specialized furniture in the entry corridor and library would utilize local craftsmen, along with commissioned art for the entry corridor and some of the classrooms. The interior and exterior glass systems would be provided by the United States, and solar glass technology would be employed on all of the exterior facade windows.

Escuela sin fronteras, School without Borders not only provides a singular construction project, but also the opportunity to provide economic incentive for American companies to look at moving into the region.
CONSTRUCTION
DIMENSION PLANS

port of entry east

puerto de entrada este
CONSTRUCTION
DIMENSION PLANS

level m1

nivel m1
CONSTRUCTION
DIMENSION PLANS

level e2

nivel e2
CALLE B. JUAREZ
COL CENTRO

INTERNACIONAL
COL CENTRO

Moreno
3121314
CONSTRUCTION
DIMENSION PLANS

level m2

nivel m2
CONSTRUCTION
DIMENSION PLANS

level e3

nível e3
CONSTRUCTION
DIMENSION PLANS

level m3

nivel m3
CALLEJON MORELOS
CONCLUSION
When Camila Perez first attended the Arizona-Sonora Border School, the “escuela sin fronteras” to the local population, in 2020 she was thirteen years old. The A-S Border School was the first of its kind, the city of Nogales, Arizona and Mexico pooled their resources to build an international school on the geopolitical line that separated their two nations. The tension between the United States and Mexico had been mounting for years, since 1990, the United States had spent nearly $50 billion dollars on militarized fences across the 720 miles of land border. Mexico’s economy had been largely stagnant since the 1980s, market liberalization and trade agreements notwithstanding, Mexican workers were still seeking jobs and opportunities in the United States, however the populist wave that was sweeping the world in the late 2010’s pushed back hard at immigration reform. Violence mounted at the site of the border, many people lost their lives trying to cross into the United States. When Nogales presented their proposal for a shared educational facility on the site of the international border it turned more than a few heads.

Camila’s family had moved up to the border, as many families did, so her parents could find work in the more industrialized north. Eventually, her father crossed the into the United States, Camila, her mother and her sister stayed behind. They had heard of the A-S Border School experiment, and relocated to Nogales, Sonora. Camila enrolled in 7th grade, her sister, who was 8 at the time was still too young to attend. The experience of attending escuela sin fronteras at its onset was one she would carry with her for the rest of her life. A bustling middle school, the border school brought together two halves of a building that opened to a multi-level open, air atrium. The wall that once was, now an open corridor buzzing with activity, was shielded from rain by a long skylight, structured by the metal fence that once defined the border line. A mix of students from the United States and Mexico commingled the way most middle school children would, in a sea of raging hormones and growth spurts, but with the defined difference that was the constant presence of border patrol. It was a school, but also so much more.
Camila recounts the feeling that this was a social experiment that could explode at any moment, the heavily armed border patrol would walk along the open corridor where the North and South sides of the building opened into each other, in these same spaces would be children, counselors, teachers, immigration agents, and families reuniting for the day. Since Camila was technically attending a school in the United States, she was able to apply for immigration relief so she could join her father. Working with the immigration programs that were a part of the school’s offerings, she met with a translator and worked through her application every day. It was during this period that several of her father’s family members perished trying to cross into Arizona, not far from Nogales. Her mother wanted her to stop her application and relocate again, but Camila and her sister insisted they needed to stay. Ultimately, although both Camila and her sister attended the A-S Border School, only Camila was accepted for relief. Camila left Nogales to join her father, her mother and sister remained in Mexico.

Thirty-years later, Camila now teaches 8th grade Spanish at the A-S Border School. As the zone of the border de-escalated, more schools cropped up in El Paso-Juarez, San Diego-Tijuana, and Laredo. Seeing the economic and social benefit of shared public infrastructure, other public buildings began to attach to the A-S Border School and expand the urban corridor of the border beyond the school. The garden like port of entry for the Border School became the module for which other facilities connected to the border corridor, stretching the zone of the border to create doorways from one country to another. After her father had passed away, Camila felt she wanted to come back to Nogales to help other young students who are making the transition between countries. Camila recounts the experience of entering through multiple levels of security to get to school every day; the ports of entry now operate as public parks for the two sides of the city. Camila has always felt very personally connected to the A-S Border School, she says the school is the first true hand of friendship that was extended across a border to bring two worlds that were very much at odds, together.
VISION OF THE FUTURE
BIBLIOGRAPHY


