

GOOD/
FENCES MAKE GOOD/
NEIGHBORS

The Rio Grande Arrival | Departure Shelter



Gabrielle Angelica Gaité

**Good Fences Make Good Neighbors:
The Rio Grande Arrival/Departure Shelter**

Gabrielle Angelica Gaité

Thesis submitted to the faculty of the
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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Thesis Abstract

Good Fences Make Good Neighbors: The Rio Grande Arrival/Departure Shelter

Gabrielle Angelica Gaité

"Where the power of the wall is to deny, the power of the door is to permit, and allow entry.¹"

Borders are represented on maps as thick, predetermined lines that delineate, separate, and segregate one area from another. A whole is divided into two or more parts. Borders become boundaries and, in reality, are abstract and intangible, often responsible for creating both geographic and political havoc. In between a border are thresholds that signal a transition between layers, spaces, times, and countries. This project engages within this Liminal space, an in-between of the threshold.

Prompted by humanitarian and political crises, thousands of people are fleeing their homes in search of safety and protection from danger, including persecution for protected reasons such as race, religion, nationality, or political opinion. Many, like unaccompanied minors, travel dangerous paths to seek asylum at one of these borders, which promise safety and security from the violent conditions in their countries. In the USA and elsewhere, seeking asylum is a human right. Simultaneously, thousands of people whose claims for asylum are unsuccessful are detained, deported, or repatriated.

In 1873, Sebastian Lerdo de Tejada, the 27th President of Mexico (1872 to 1876) declared, "Let there be a desert between strength and weakness." The United States of America and the United Mexican States share a historically-contested 1,954-mile border. Any wall separating two countries belongs to both countries. This thesis considers borders as more than places that close or delimit one place from another, but also as opportunities to expand into living and organic spaces. Borders both delimit and negotiate between two sides of neither a single state nor a single place but as thresholds which hundreds of thousands of separate lives navigate every single day along the border regions.

This thesis explores how architecture focused on empowering at-risk asylum seekers can shape the border space. In particular, the chosen design proposes a Halfway House on the threshold space between the twin-sister borderplex of Laredo, Texas, United States of America, and Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas, Mexico.

¹Unwin, Simon. (2007).

General Audience Abstract

Good Fences Make Good Neighbors: The Rio Grande Arrival/Departure Shelter

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Borders are represented on maps as thick, predetermined lines that delineate, separate and segregate one area from another. A whole divided into two or more parts. Borders become boundaries and in reality, are abstract and intangible, often responsible for creating both geographic and political havoc. In between these borders, is where we find liminal space.

Prompted by humanitarian and political crises, thousands of people are fleeing their homes in search of safety and protection from danger, including persecution of race, religion, nationality, or political opinion. Many people, including unaccompanied minors, travel dangerous paths to seek asylum at one of these borders, which promise safety and security from the violent conditions in their countries. In the USA and elsewhere, seeking asylum is a human right. Simultaneously, thousands of people whose claims for asylum are unsuccessful are detained, deported or repatriated.

This thesis considers borders as more than places that close or delimit one place from another, but also as opportunities to expand into living and organic spaces. Borders both delimit and negotiate between two sides of neither a single state, nor a single place but as thresholds which hundreds of thousands of separate lives navigate every single day along the border regions.

This thesis explores how architecture focused on empowering at-risk asylum seekers can shape the border space. In particular, the chosen design proposes a halfway house between Laredo, Texas and Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas.



Figure 01 Overlooking Laredo and Nuevo Laredo



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To my parents, Jojo and Joyce Gaité. Thank you for your unwavering support and love, and for encouraging my love of learning. All of this is because of you, and for you.

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I cannot possibly begin this book without reverently expressing my gratitude and thanks to all those who have guided, encouraged, cheered, and taught me. Your assistance in completing this thesis was unconditional. It has always been a collective effort. Thank you.

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To my mom, thank you. For staying up and praying for me during every presentation.
My ultimate prayer warrior.

To my dad, thank you. For being my first teacher and mentor. I aspire to be just like you.
My biggest inspiration.

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To my chair and committee, thank you. I could not have undertaken this thesis and my Master's program without you all. Thank you for pushing me to learn, unlearn, and relearn things far beyond Architecture. It has truly been such an honor to have been mentored by you three.

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To my friends from the WAAC, all of my fondest memories in the studio and school were shared with you. You all made my transition to America from the Philippines so much easier.

To Peggy and Anne, visiting Laredo with you two changed the course of this thesis in the best possible way. I couldn't have asked for better chaperones. Thank you for sharing your passion for psychology and immigration. Let's go back to Laredo.

To all of my aunts who took on the role of being my second moms in America (and back home); *tita Deanne, tita Tata, tita Pam, tita Pinky, tita Nor, and tita Kaycee.* You were all my backbones.

And *to Alex,* you have been with me through it all. Thank you for motivating me, keeping me grounded, proofreading all my writings, cooking me dinner, making life easier while I focused on school, and for consistently picking me up when I leave the studio at 4 am. You're the best.

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Introduction

Imagine a mansion with 203 bedrooms with each room requiring a key before you enter.

Similarly, there are 203 sovereign states, and each room in that mansion indicates a sovereign state, or simply, a country.

Now think of a country like Singapore or Germany, which can access 159 keys. What does that mansion look like for them? Expansive, perhaps. A variety of choices of which bedrooms to visit. Followed by countries like the United States of America and Mexico which have access to 157 and 132 keys respectively. The mansion from their perspective is still spacious, with ample options to visit. One could probably visit 2-3 bedrooms easily in one day.

What about a country like the Philippines, which only has access to 66 keys? What does that mansion look like for them? And then you have a country like Afghanistan, which only has access to 22 keys. Try to envision what that mansion really looks like for them.

Limited, restricted, and confined.

Before you exit your bedroom (or country in the larger scheme of the analogy), you are told where you can and cannot go. This is how a passport works. Fortunate are those who hold stronger passports, but what about those born in countries of war? Countries with less international power? Developing countries?

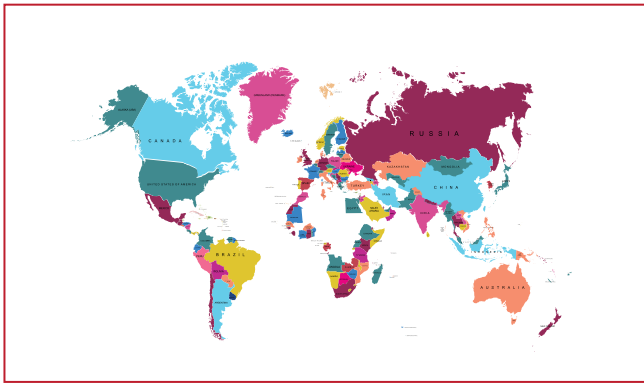


Figure 02
Singapore and Germany
159 Countries

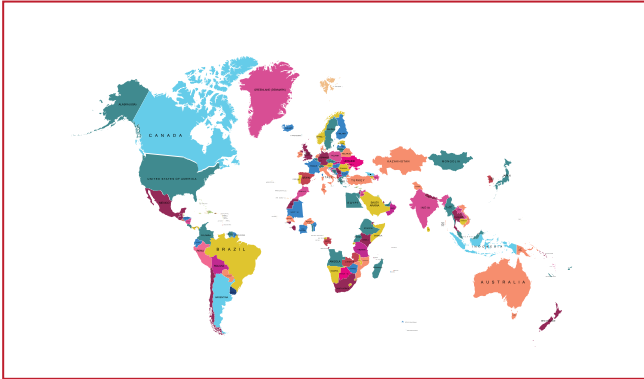


Figure 03
United States of America
157 Countries

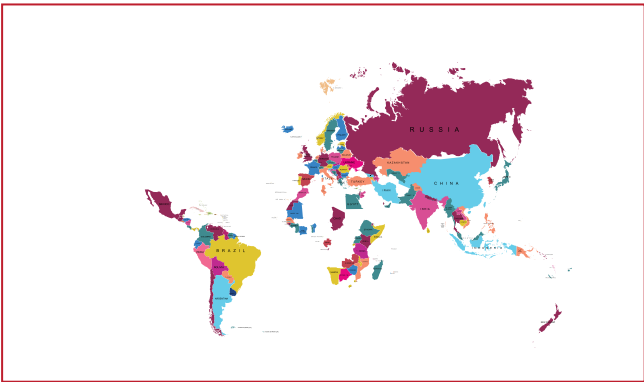


Figure 04
Mexico
132 Countries

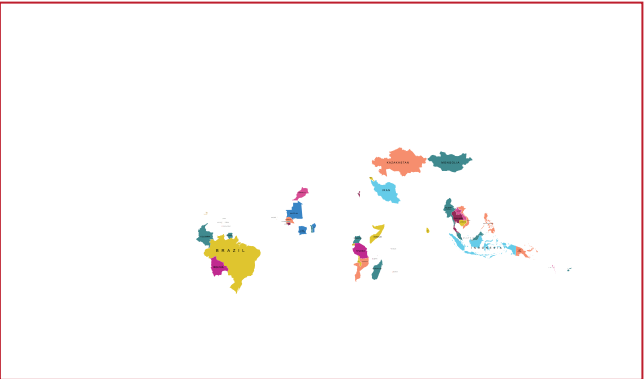


Figure 05
Philippines
66 Countries

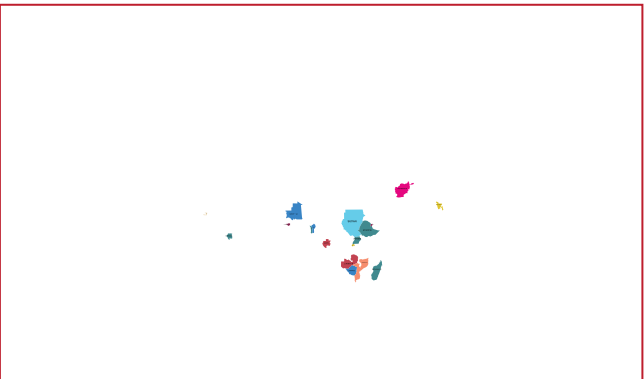


Figure 06
Afghanistan
22 Countries

This thesis started with a stark reminder of what my life was like in the Philippines. There is an elevated highway in Metro Manila, Philippines called the Skyway. Beneath it, with similar routes, are multiple expressways. What separates the two is a fee. The Skyway is \$4 upon entry; it is not a fixed fee as some exits require additional pay, depending on the location. The elevated highway, from a marginalized standpoint, separates the privileged from the lesser privileged. At certain locations of the entry and exit of the Skyway, prefabricated concrete boards mask and cover the sides of the expressway overlooking the slums and impoverished areas of the metropolitan. In a developing country like the Philippines, where 18% of its population falls under the poverty line, a \$4 one-way fee is expensive.

As you could imagine, someone who passes through the Skyway arrives at their destination faster than someone who passes through the regular tolled expressways. This notion of layering through verticality was the first experience I questioned.



Manmade Borders
 — Wall
 Fence

Figure 07
 Manmade Borders
 Around the World



Figures 08
 Skyway, Philippines



Figures 09
 Skyway, Philippines



PART I

THEORY

Border² (n) - an outer edge, a boundary, a line of demarcation
Border (v) - to touch at the edge or boundary of something

Borders are represented on maps as thick, predetermined lines that delineate, separate, and segregate one area from another. A whole is divided into two or more parts. Drawing a line is a powerful tool that is problematic and dominating, yet potentially binding. The thickness of a line, drawn to scale, reveals actual spaces consisting of architecture, landscapes and people. With it comes a narrative of ties, parameters, promises and memories. Borders are superimposed in meaning and are the result of a conflict for control over space. Borders become boundaries and in reality, are abstract and intangible, often responsible for creating both geographic and political havoc.

It is difficult to overlook how the concept of a line on a map has affected our association with nations and boundaries, their susceptibility to political manipulation, and how borderlines are integral to cultural participation. However, borders are more than mere lines. They consist of actual, spatial places: made of landscape and/or architecture, subject to the changes in season, streams of water, gushes of wind, migration of people, and places that are often inhabited. It is this understanding of the border's dynamic features that opens up possibilities for change.

²Merriam-Webster. (2004).

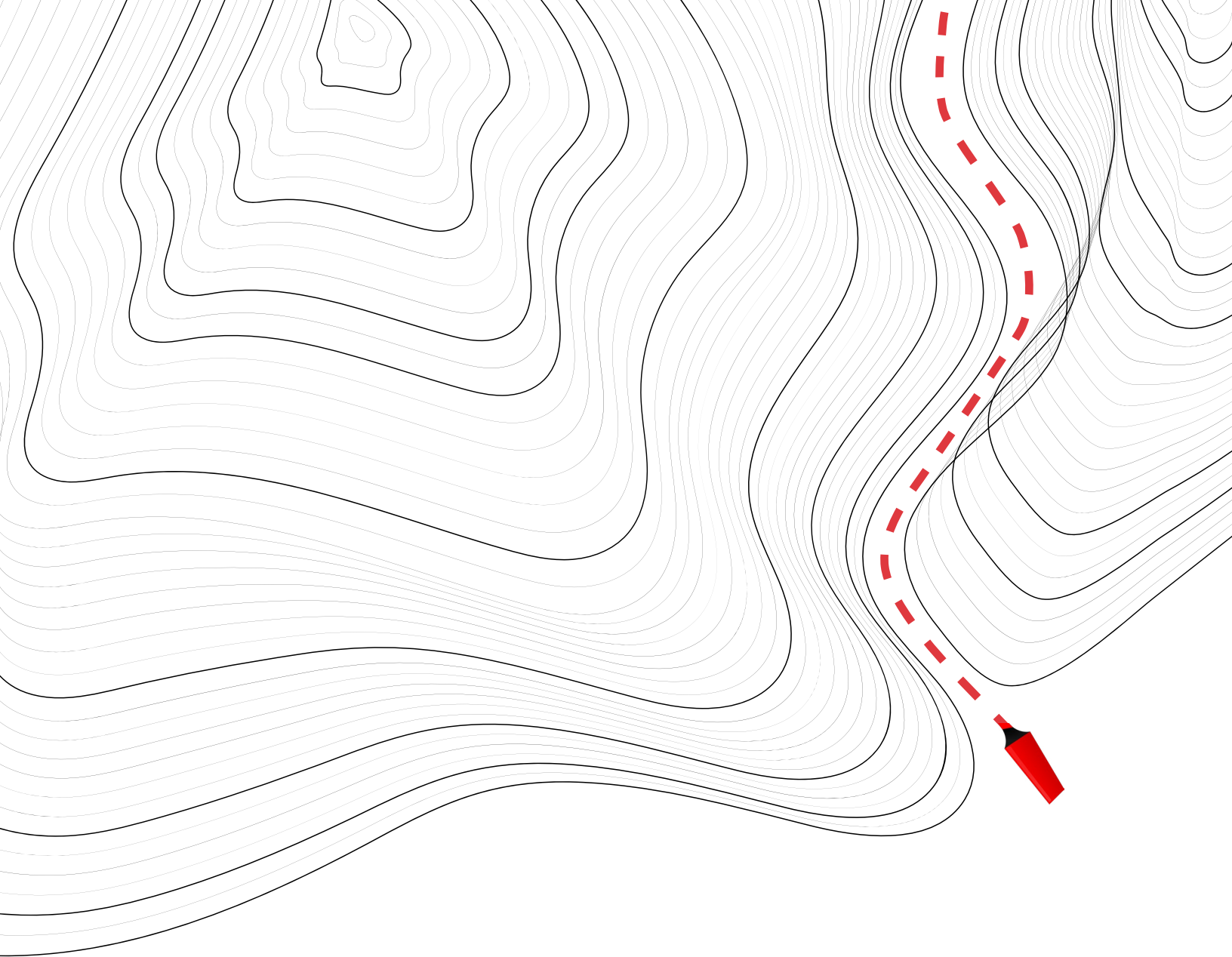
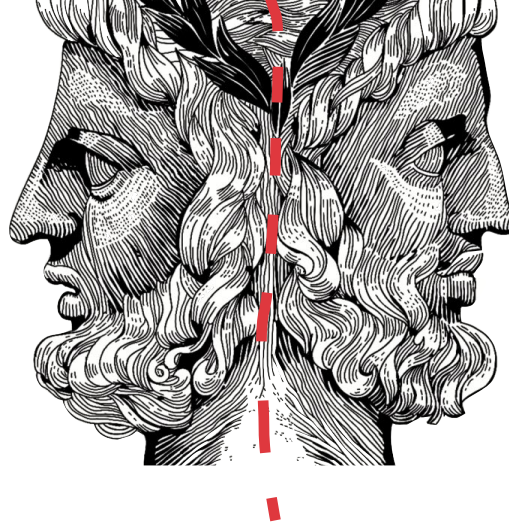


Figure 10
Borderlines



Janus

The two-faced Roman God of Doors of Gateways, Janus oversaw what was, and what is to come. He faces both ways, looking into wholes and parts, collaboration and competition, altruism and egoism, integration and self-assertion, sacred and profane.³ He represents the middle ground. The in-between. The liminal space. This project engages within the liminal space, defined as the threshold and transition between two parts or two boundaries. It is the transitioning of layers, space, borders, and the movement of one to another. Thresholds allow transformative change as the user moves from the profane to the sacred.⁴

The issue of borders is more than the actual border itself. We deal with structures that exist between parts of a whole. A border can be tangible (transition between countries) or intangible (in the mind). In both cases, the boundary has a certain extension in length, width, and thickness, and has the structural prerequisites to cross and bypass it. The focus now shifts to a changing and dynamic space. It exposes the seams, removing the thickened edge, and the possibility of liminal spaces opening up for negotiation. The liminal space is as meaningful as the border itself because it unites both parts into a whole.

³Hampden-Turner, Charles. (1981).

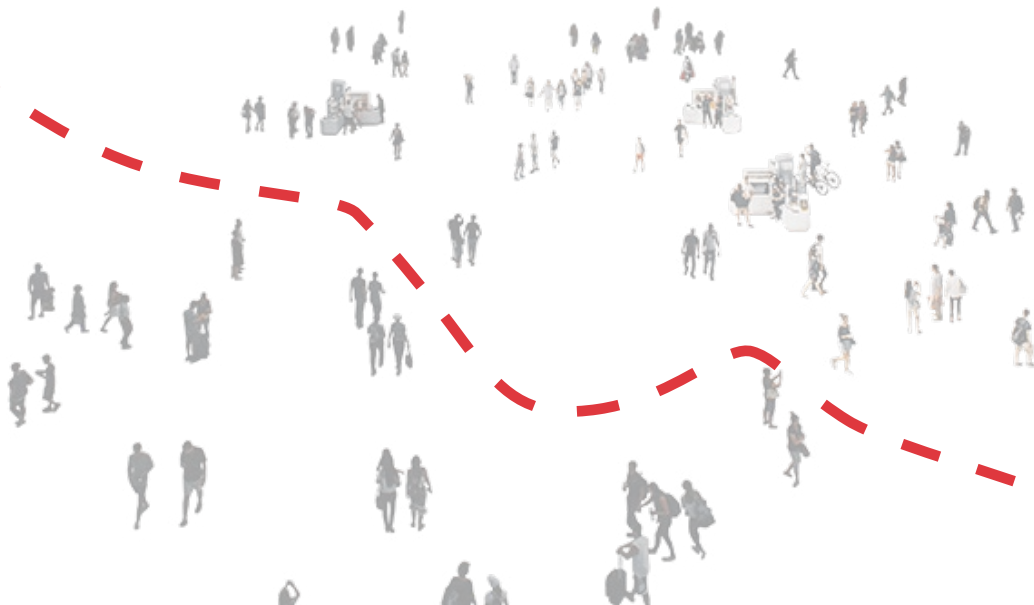
⁴Turner, Victor. (1977).

Othering

The polarity of a map is ingrained in our understanding of a border—are you within or outside the line that the border controls? Othering is described as “which identities are set up in an unequal relationship.”⁵ The narrative of othering in borders is the differential way of thinking of the one from the other, the in-group against the out-group wherein one group believes in their superiority from the other, the out-group. To manage ambiguity, a person or group of people develops borders to articulate, differentiate or hierarchically integrate their interactions with the environment (which includes the self, other individuals, a group of people, the physical world and so on).⁶

⁵Crang, Mike. (1998).

⁶Marisco, et al. (2013).



Types of Borders

A border can be natural (soft)—a body of water, such as an ocean, a river, or a mountain range—or man-made (hard), often declaring itself loudly in the form of a wall, a fence, or a barrier.

The following are examples of borders and how people negotiate with them.

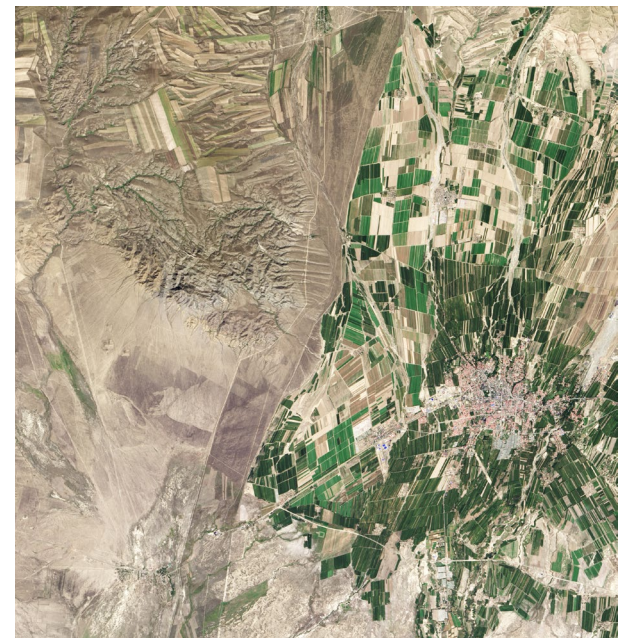


Figures 13-14 Haiti and Dominican Republic

Haiti and the Dominican Republic

Hispaniola, a Caribbean island, is home to two countries: Haiti and the Dominican Republic. The socioeconomic realities of both nations are centuries in the making, established in an era of colonialism that is obvious in the languages of their people: Haitian French and Dominican Spanish. A boundary of 245-miles is separated by a combination of rivers, roads and forests with Haiti sitting on the West, and the Dominican Republic to its East. Between the two countries, one country gravely suffers from deforestation. Haiti's agricultural problems started during the French colonial period with a high need for fuel to process sugarcane and have continued to this day with a more intensified demand for charcoal to fuel its metropolitan areas.⁷ Today, only a small portion of Haiti's land remains forested.

⁷Britannica. (2019).



Figures 15-16 China and Kazakhstan

China and Kazakhstan

The Sino-Kazakhstan Border separates The People's Republic of China and The Republic of Kazakhstan. A boundary of 1,170-mile separates the two nations, with China on the East and Kazakhstan on the West. It is primarily a combination of forests, rivers, and lakes. A stark difference in land-use policies is shown even from one satellite image.⁸ China's land use is aggressive; faced with the need to feed 1.3 billion people, China crops in almost any area that can be farmed. Unlike Kazakhstan, only 0.03% of its land is dedicated to permanent farming. As seen in the figure, Kazakhstan's agricultural methods rely on rain-fed rather than controlled watering, meaning fields remain more dry than its neighboring country's agriculture.

⁸Riebeek, Holli. (2014).



Figures 17-18 East and West Berlin

East and West Berlin

In 1961, East Germany (Soviet Union) began to build a barbed wire and concrete wall to keep the so-called Western (United States of America, Great Britain, and eventually France) Fascists from entering East Germany. In reality, it was an attempt to keep the East from defecting to the West.⁹ The Wall became a symbol of autocracy and tyranny as it stood for 28 years. The 834-mile border was a combination of concrete, electric fences, vehicle barriers, and a 15-foot wide "death strip" in the middle. It was a buffer zone in-between, patrolled by guards. Any German, either coming from the East or West would be shot and killed. The strip aimed to allow authorities to track the footsteps of fleeing East Germans to establish their course of action and to punish any patrols that allowed them to escape¹⁰ The success of the wall only had an average of fewer than 10 illegal apprehensions a day.

The wall fell in 1989.

⁹Berlin Wall.
¹⁰Rademaekers, William. (1961).



Figures 19-20 North and South Korea

North and South Korea

Although North and South Korea share a language of tradition and culture, their current political language is strife and division.¹¹ The Korean peninsula shares a 160-mile long, 3-mile width border. Located in the 38 degree north parallel, the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) was built in 1953 as a temporary political boundary. It is a middle ground between the two nations. The landmine-infested DMZ is now the world's most fortified border, serving as a reminder that North and South Korea are still explicitly at war. The two neighboring relations still vary between engagement, estrangement, and even conflict.

To this day, the wall still stands.

¹¹McCurry, Justin. (2022).

Historic Precedents



Figure 21 Caravanserai Market

Caravanserai

The Caravanserai existed in the Middle East, Central Asia, and North Africa as a guesthouse or roadside inn. It was designed to provide lodging to travelers. Its most frequent patrons, the merchants, and their caravans, thought of the inn as a safe respite and as a center to exchange goods and culture.

The design of the Caravanserai was notable for its protective purpose, not just from extreme climates and weather but also from bandits who eyed merchants traveling with silk, spices, etc. Caravanserais were frequently built and spaced 20-25 miles apart, with tall, fortified walls for security. Caravans entered through a large gate that would be closed with chains in the evening. It had outposts on every corner that guards manned. Inside, a ground-floor central courtyard enhanced the sense of sight, sound, and smell of a traveler through the donkeys, horses, and wild animals in their stables, as well as fires lit around the area for cooking. In the courtyard, travelers exchanged news, stories, merchandise, and ideas. Small, unfurnished rooms were found on the second floor for the rest.



Figure 22 Great Hall in 1910



Figure 23 Great Hall in 2023

Ellis Island

Rising political instability, economic suffering, and religious persecution plagued Europe in the 1800s, triggering the world's largest mass human migration. For 35 years, Castle Garden in New York, where approximately 8,000,000 immigrants passed through, was deemed unprepared to cater to the large influx of incoming migration. This led the federal government to construct a new structure on Ellis Island.

In 1892, it opened its doors to allow new immigrants to enter. More than 12,000,000 immigrants arrived in the United States through Ellis Island over 12 years.¹² Notable features of its Beaux-Arts classic styled interiors include the two-story Registry Room, also known as the Great Hall. The Great Hall could accommodate the processing of 5,000 immigrants in one day. It is approximately 200-feet long and 100-feet wide and 56-feet high, and a perimeter balcony envelopes the space. Its towering vaulted ceiling and wide openings at the clerestory heighten the sense of the Great Hall.¹³

¹²Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island.

¹³Ellis Island, Main Building Interior



PART II

CONTEXT



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"Let there be a desert between strength and weakness."

-President of Mexico, Sebastian de Tejada, 1873





United States of America and Mexico Border

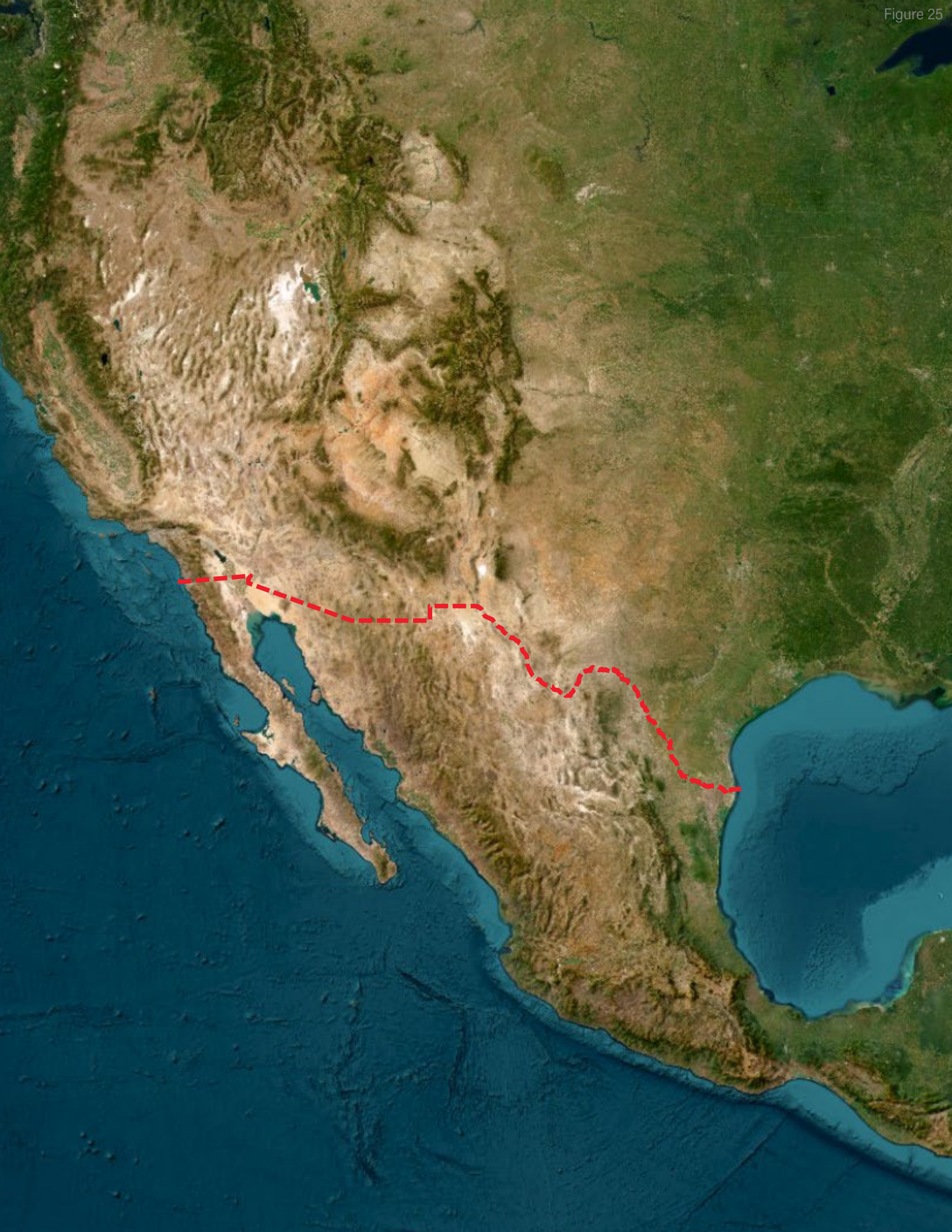
The United States of America and the United Mexican States share a historically-contested 1,954-mile border with 48 border crossings and 330 ports of entry. Approximately 350 million legal crossings happen annually.

The US-Mexico border is a relatively modern construct. Conceivably, the border first came into existence with Mexico's independence from Spain (which included the territories now known as California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas) in 1821, although very quickly the border lands were blurred when America began to move towards Mexico.¹⁴ In 1836, a short-lived revolt established the Republic of Texas which expressed grievances against Mexican Catholicism's abolishment of slavery.

The emphasis to construct a clear symbolic boundary between Anglo-America and Latinos has always been a primary focus for both neighboring nations.¹⁵ Simultaneously, the Republic of Texas claimed sovereignty over the Rio Grande River, and Laredo, a city claimed by both sides but protected by neither, was caught in the middle. Another short-lived claim was the Republic of the Rio Grande in 1840, which controlled the resources and protection of the city of Laredo. Despite some success of both revolts, the line of the border was never fully marked.

¹⁴Verkoren, Otto. (1998).

¹⁵Massey, Douglas. (2016).



After back-and-forth contestment, Mexico responded in 1846, proclaiming its intent to fight defensively against invasion from America. The border was not fully established until 1853, when Mexico signed the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which granted the United States to the current states of Arizona, California, Nevada, New Mexico, Utah, Colorado, and parts of Oklahoma, Kansas, and Wyoming. It also formally established the Rio Grande as a natural boundary between New Mexico and Texas with Chihuahua, Coahuila, Nuevo Leon, and Tamaulipas.¹⁶

With the location of the border finally settled, America diverted its attention to the symbolic definition of its boundary between the Mexicans. The border between the United States and Mexico marks an abrupt transformation from one world to another. There is a long-standing view among Americans of the Mexican border as a war zone; associated with crime, prostitution, drugs, trafficking, illegal detainment, mass migration, environmental waste, and corruption. As a result, Americans have a predisposition to approach the border with diligence, security, and diplomacy.¹⁷

Hundreds of thousands of undocumented immigrants have illegally crossed the border into the United States throughout the years. As a result, both Democratic and Republican presidents of the United States have built border barriers. Following the September 11, 2001 attacks on New York and Washington, an era of increased border security began. Seen below are the different types of soft and hard borders between America and Mexico.

¹⁶Massey, Douglas. (2016).

¹⁷Ibid.

Wall

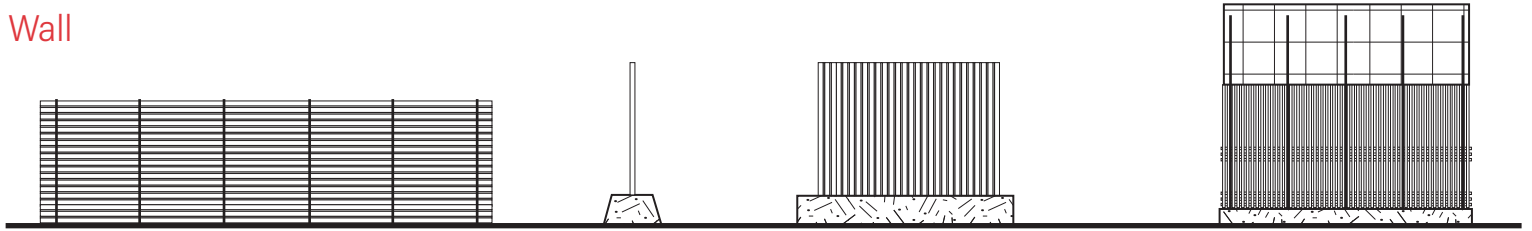


Figure 26

Fence

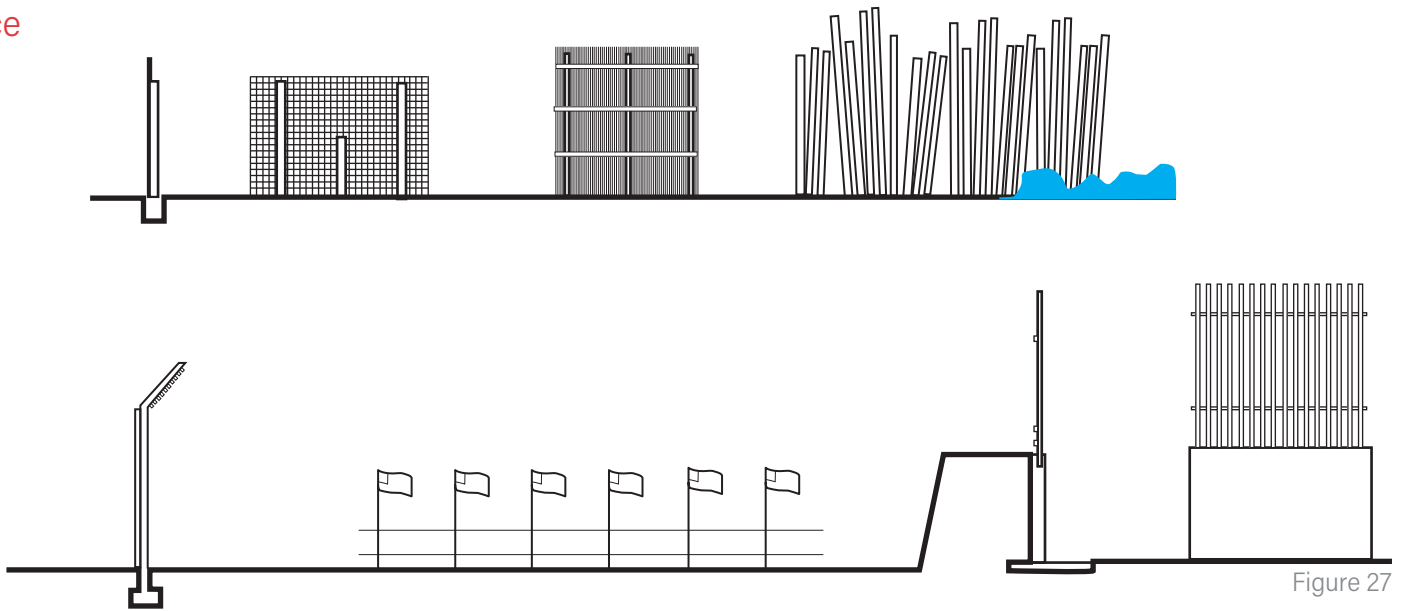


Figure 27

Anti-Vehicle Barrier

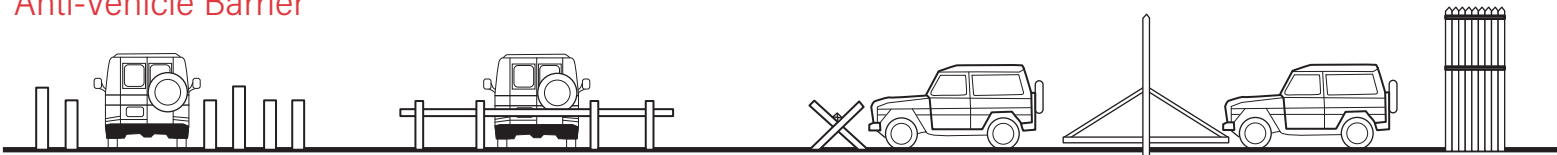


Figure 28

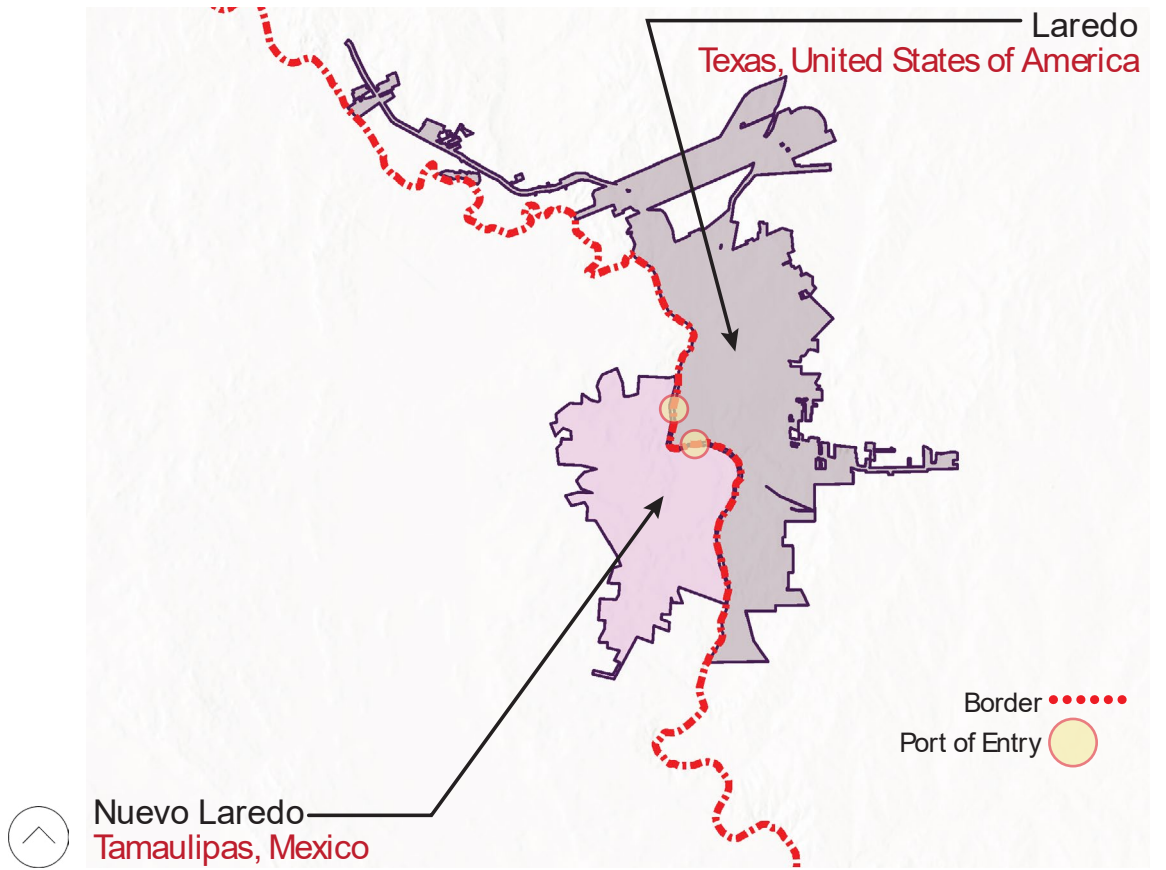


Figure 29 Laredo Borderplex



Figures 30-32 Border Crossings

Laredo Borderplex

The Laredo Borderplex, often referred to as the Twin-Sister City of Laredo, shares the border of the Rio Grande with Laredo, Texas, and Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas. Their economic and geographic history are intertwined. It is one of six cross-border agglomerations linked by five border crossings (one railroad and four bridges). The Mexican side, like many other borderlands between the United States and Mexico, is larger and more inhabited with a population of 460,000 people, and the American side with a population of 270,000 people.

Laredo's relationship with Mexico city was problematic in 1840, thus separating and creating their state called the Republic of the Rio Grande-Laredo even became the capital of the 10-month nation. After the brief stint, the Texas Rangers occupied Laredo. By the end of the Mexican-American war in 1846, Nuevo Laredo was founded by Mexicans who chose to leave Laredo when the Rio Grande was established as the international boundary and Laredo became part of the United States.¹⁸ Hence, Nuevo means New Laredo.

¹⁸Thelmadatter, Leigh. (2020).

The Island

From the onset, the thesis could have swayed in any direction—a welcome center, an international bridge, an immigration center, an embassy, a port of entry, or even a museum of memories. What was always evident though was that the site, the people, and its context would dictate the premise of this thesis.

The Laredo Borderplex shares a 136-mile borderspace but the five border crossings and their neighboring areas were prioritized when looking for a site.



1995 Base Map

The island and its immediate surrounding of the Las Palmas Birding Sanctuary are dense in landscape. The Rio Grande bordering the island on all sides appears wider.



2005 Base Map

Adjacent to the island, in front of the Las Palmas Bird Sanctuary, stripping of trees have already begun. There is a paved walkway heading towards the island. It remains dense overall in landscape.



2019 Base Map

The island is bare, its landscape has been stripped off completely. The Rio Grande surrounding the island closer to Laredo is barely visible.

The Anomaly

There is a line that is not yet permanently inscribed as a border, it seems to shift and move. In Figure 36, the borderline is below the island marked as a white line, closer towards Nuevo Laredo, yet in Figure 37 the borderline has shifted and the red dashed line is closer towards Laredo.

Upon further investigation, seen in Figure 38 the 1955 map of Webb County, the border is inscribed as a black dashed line. Unsure if this was a mistake, a series of other 1955 maps of Webb Country on the Rio Grande show that the border does not cut through any other smaller or larger islands. ***The Island is a real-life liminal space.*** It represents the middle ground, the in-between of two cities and two countries.

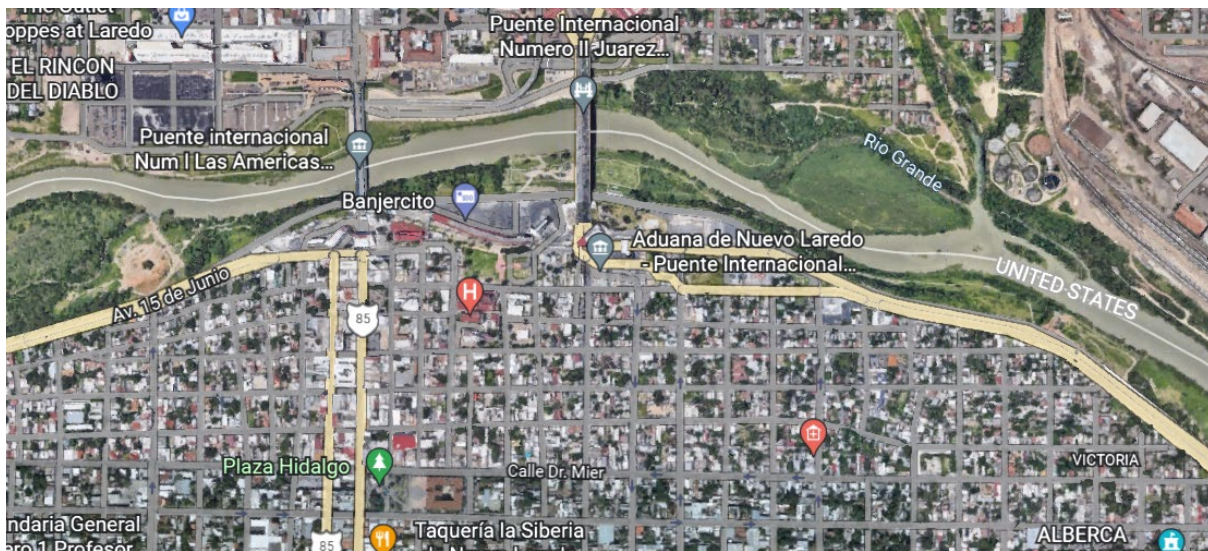


Figure 36 Dynamic Border 1

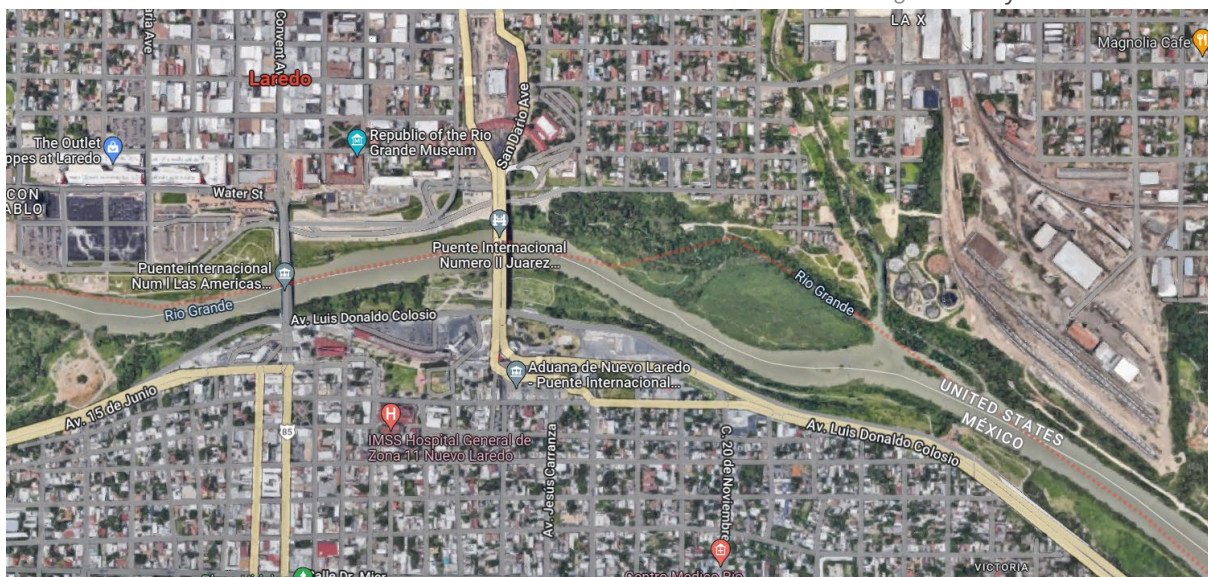


Figure 37 Dynamic Border 2



REPUBLIC OF MEXICO

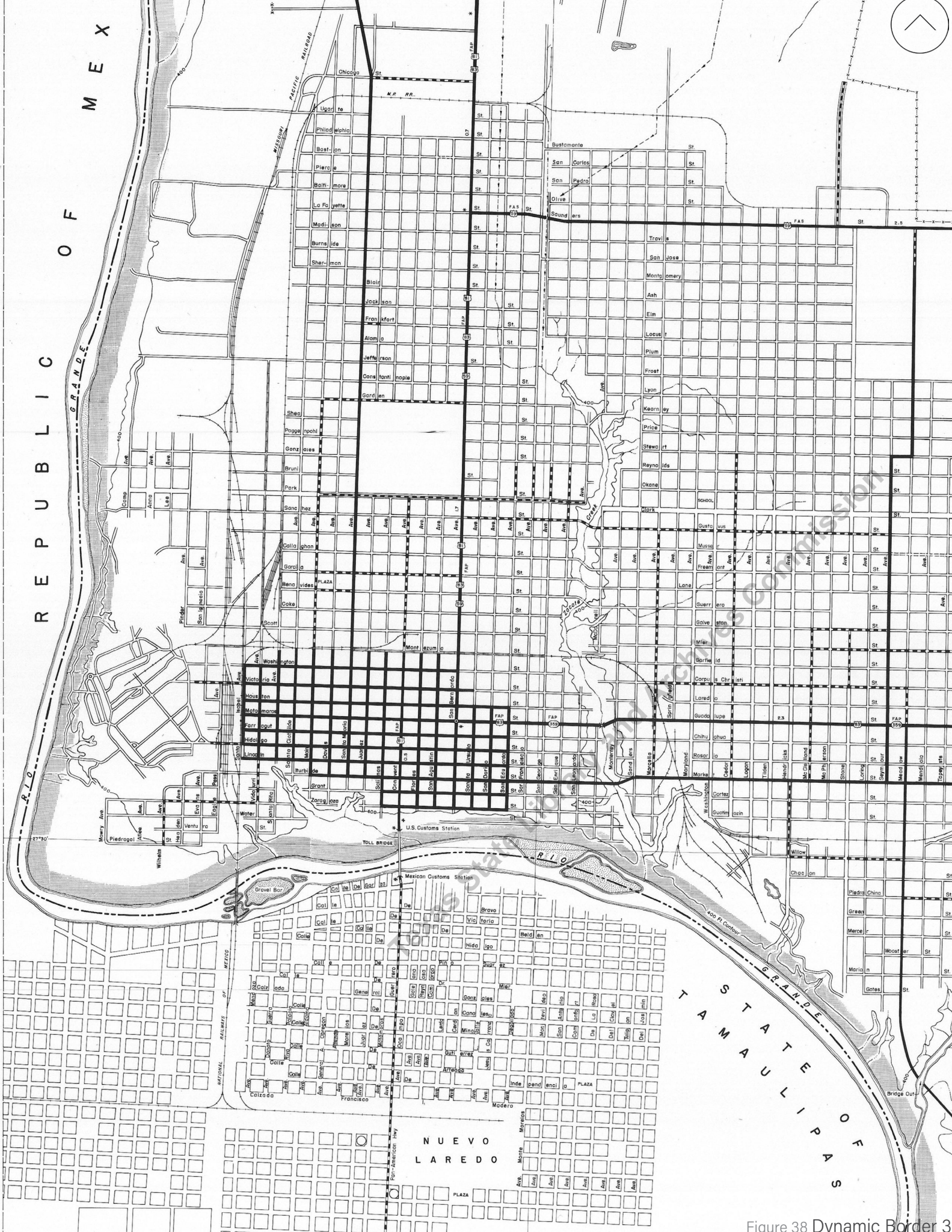
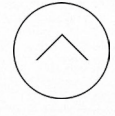


Figure 38 Dynamic Border 3

Border Crossing Data

The economies of the twin-sister city are so intertwined that over 47% of US exports to Mexico and 36% of goods heading north cross the border of Laredo. It is the busiest truck port of entry with approximately 850 trucks crossing every hour.

Ranked 3rd among all Border Crossings in America

17,524,000

*1st is San Ysidro, CA with 421,267,000

*2nd is El Paso, TX with 20,084,000

Ranked 6th among all Border Crossings for **Pedestrians**

1,804,000

*1st is San Ysidro, CA with 5,278,000

*2nd is El Paso, TX with 2,981,000

*3rd is Otay Mesa, CA with 2,269,000

*4th is Calexico, CA with 2,224,000

*5th is San Luis, AZ with 1,875,000

Ranked 1st among all Border Crossings for **Bus Pedestrians**

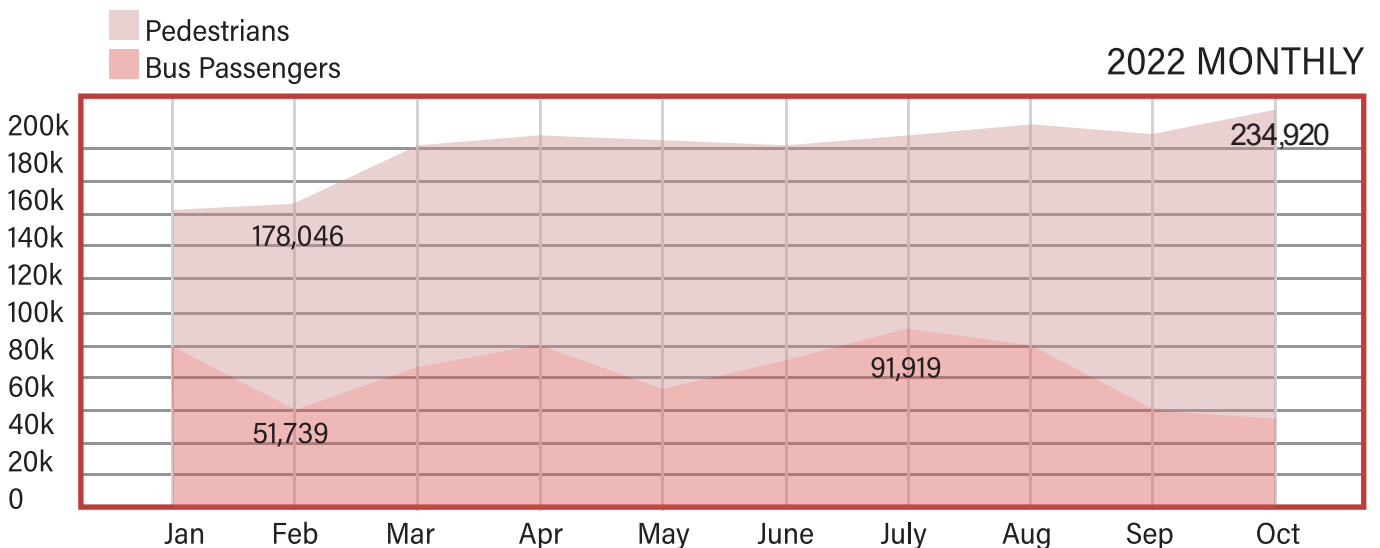
669,000

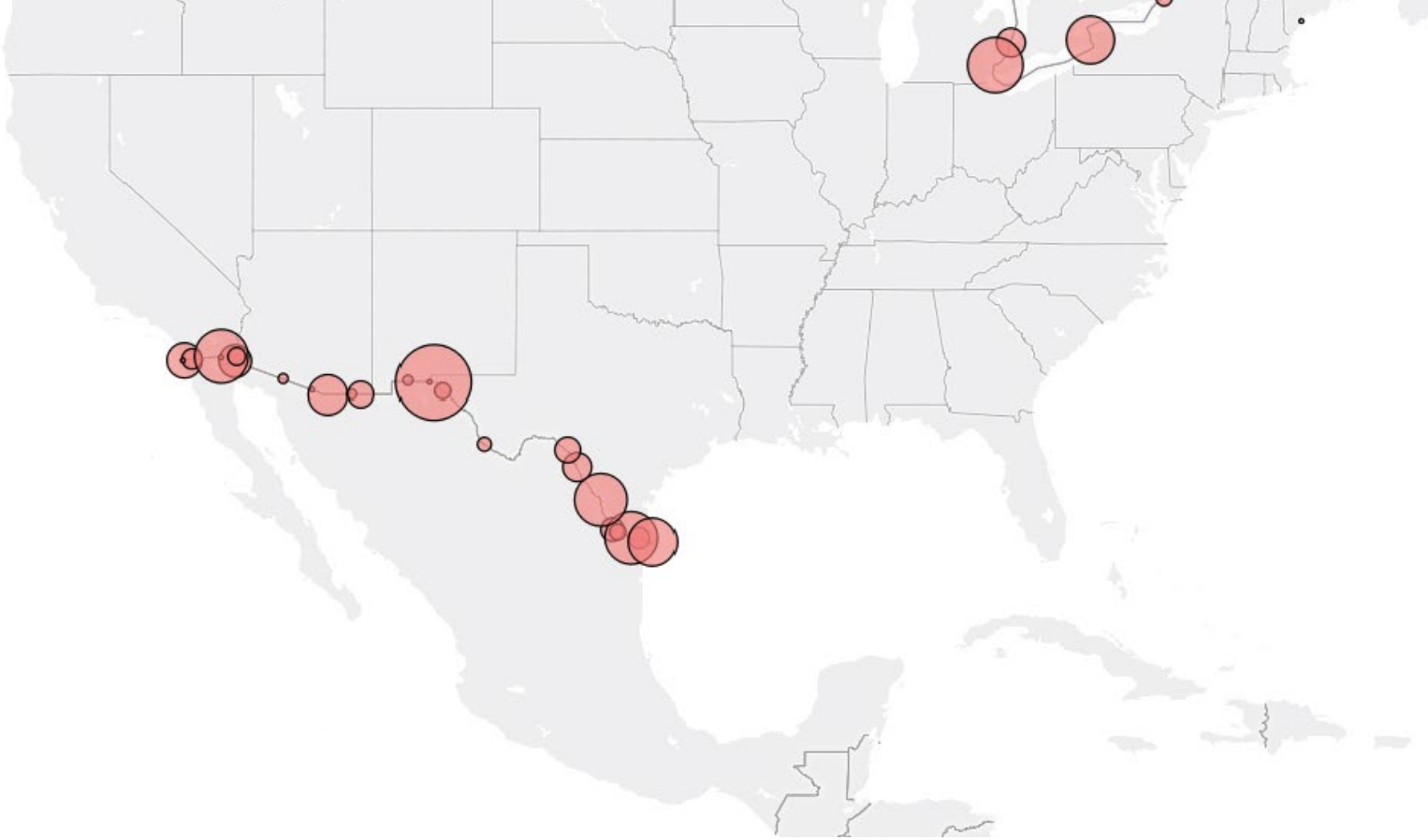
*2nd is Nogales, AZ with 130,000

Ranked 1st among all Border Crossings for **Trucks**

5,092,000

*2nd is Detroit, MI with 2,550,000





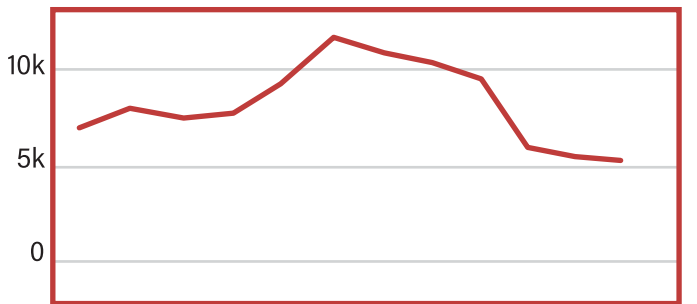
2022 MONTHLY UNACCOMPANIED MINORS



The unfortunate reality is that there is an ongoing migration crisis. People will go through extreme measures to try to provide a better life for themselves, which includes illegally crossing the border.

Oct 320 Nov 355 Dec 348 Jan 284 Feb 383 Mar 548 Apr 415 May 356 Jun 293 Jul 202 Aug 221 Sep 261 Total 3,986

2022 MONTHLY SINGLE ADULTS



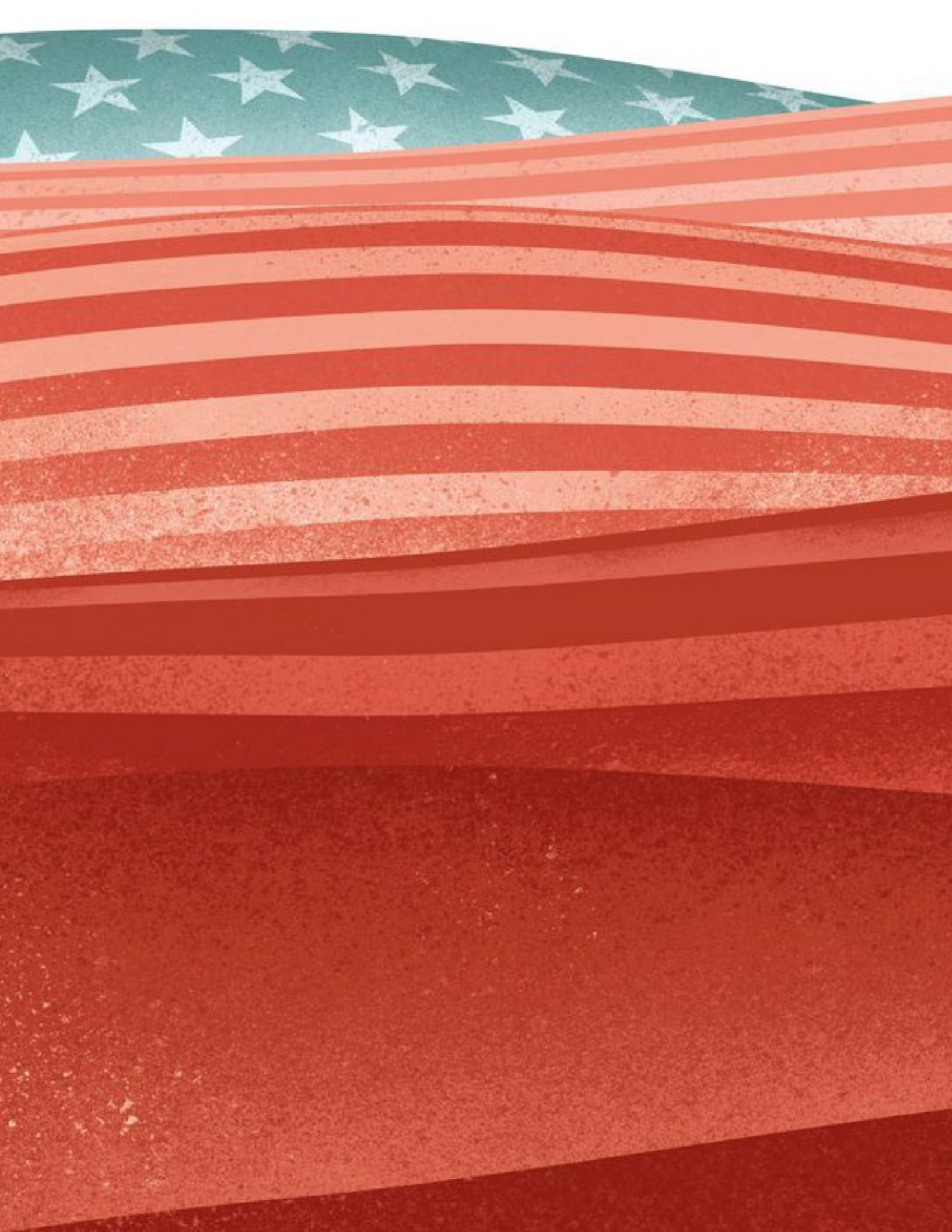
Oct 6,901 Nov 7,374 Dec 6,714 Jan 6,911 Feb 8,910 Mar 13,008 Apr 11,950 May 10,994 Jun 9,354 Jul 6,293 Aug 5,894 Sep 5,778 Total 100,081

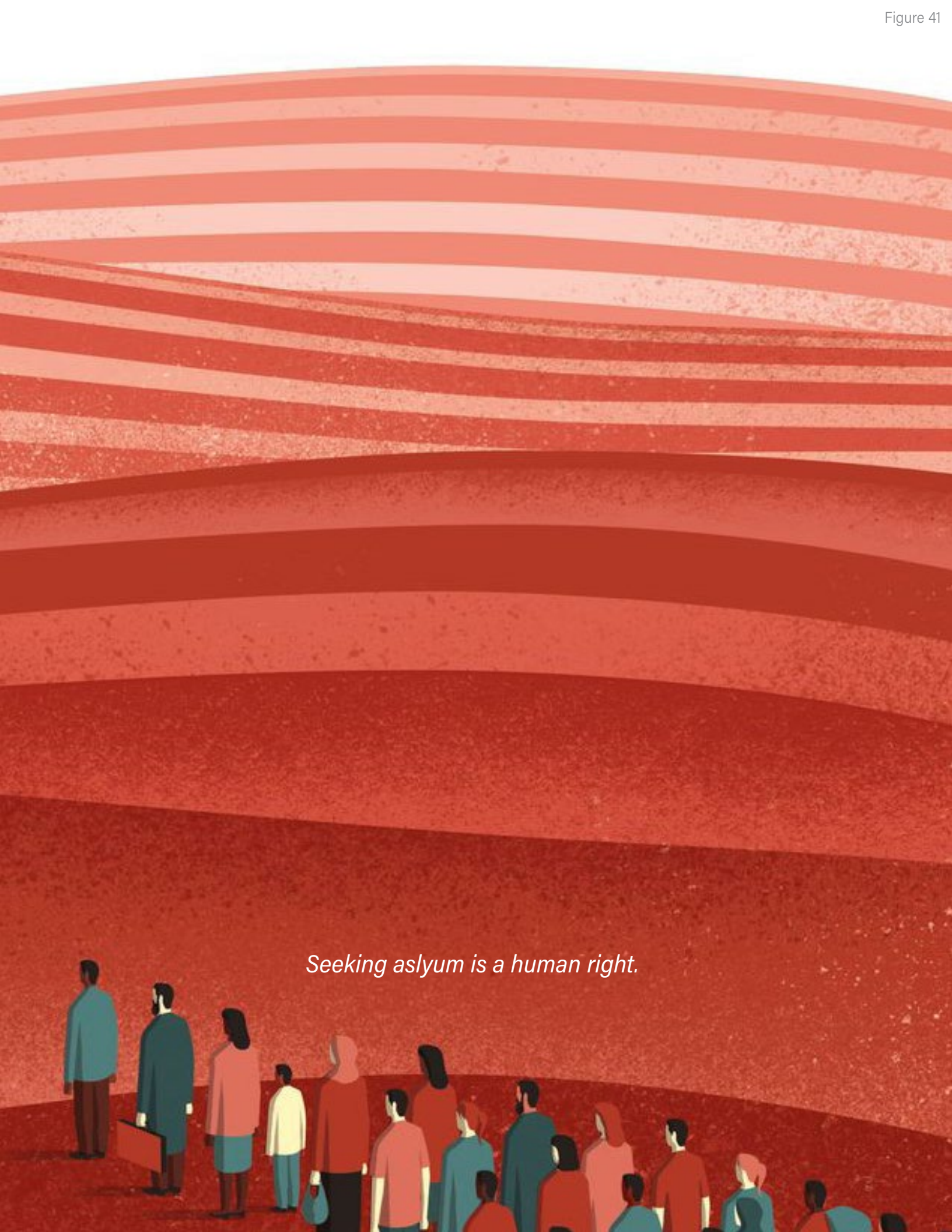
2022 MONTHLY FAMILY UNITS



Oct 223 Nov 301 Dec 243 Jan 180 Feb 208 Mar 244 Apr 212 May 332 Jun 239 Jul 108 Aug 184 Sep 302 Total 2,776

Figures 39-40 Border Crossing Data





Seeking asylum is a human right.

Asylum Seeker

Prompted by humanitarian and political crises, thousands of people are fleeing their homes in search of safety and protection from danger, including persecution for protected reasons such as race, religion, nationality, or political opinion.

Many, like unaccompanied minors, travel dangerous paths to seek asylum at one of these borders, which promise safety and security from the violent conditions in their countries. In the USA and the whole world, **seeking asylum is a human right**. Simultaneously, thousands of people whose claims for asylum are unsuccessful are detained, deported, or repatriated.

The United States has seen a growth in the number of asylum seekers with pending cases—nearly 1,600,000 individuals as of January 2023. Pending Asylum cases are expected to increase with the termination of Title 42, a public health approach allowing asylum seekers' expulsion without a hearing.

The process is rigorous, and extensive and covers multiple procedures before one can be approved for asylum, which can vary between months to years. ***An Asylum Seeker is in a state of liminality.***

There are two types of asylum qualification in the United States: Affirmative and Defensive.

This thesis welcomes both Asylum qualifications.

MAJORITY OF COUNTRIES

- Guatemala
- El Salvador
- Honduras
- Nicaragua
- India
- Ukraine
- Brazil
- Eritrea
- Ghana
- Ethiopia
- Cameroon

***ASYLEE**

- Person granted Asylum

CREDIBLE FEAR

PERSECUTED + WELL FOUNDED FEAR OF

- Race
- Religion
- Nationality
- Membership in a particular social group
- Political opinion

NOT BECAUSE

- Wanted a better economic opportunity
- Family-based immigration takes longer
- They didn't know better

EXAMPLES OF REAL WORLD ASYLUM

- Gang violence
- Forced smuggling
- Persecution of LGBTQ+ community

Asylum Qualification in the United States

AFFIRMATIVE ASYLUM

- Involves your physical presence in the United States (present at a port of entry)
- While application is pending, Asylum Seekers have the freedom to live in the USA

DEFENSIVE ASYLUM

- Application occurs whenever you request asylum to prevent removal from the United States (removal proceedings)
- Undocumented and caught by U.S. Customs and Border Protection

Seeking Asylum is a human right.

Figure 42 Asylum Seeker Definition

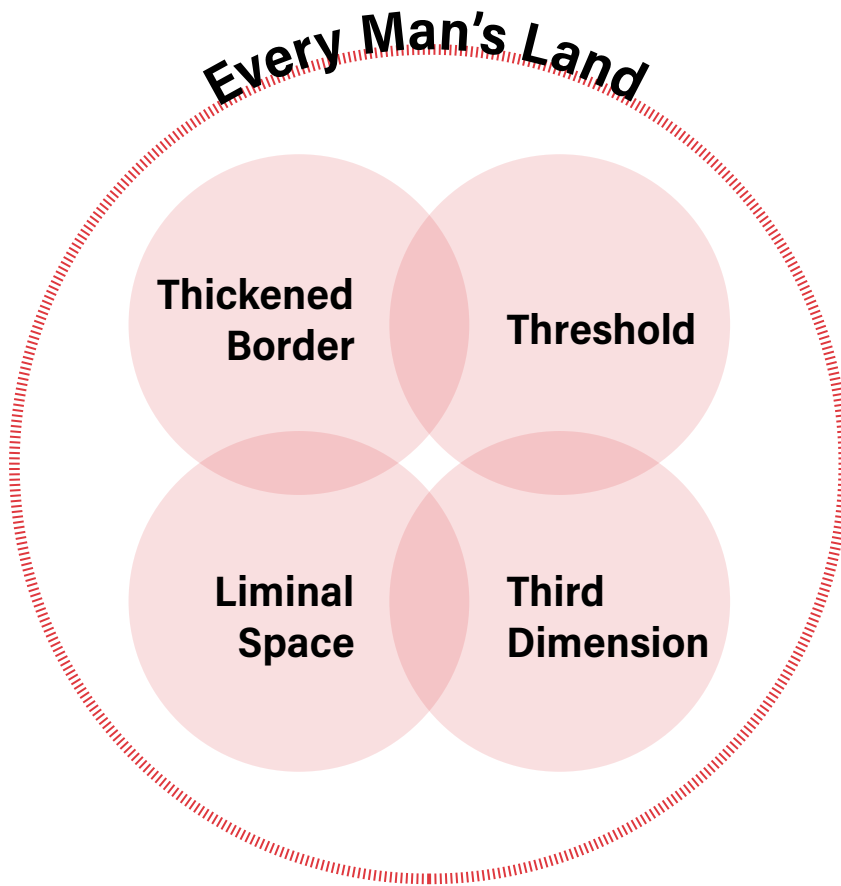


Figure 43 Every Man's Land

Goal of the Thesis

Through pulling apart the seams and thickening up the border, a threshold is created where there is an in-between of two cities and two countries. The liminality of the island and the people who will inhabit it establishes a third dimension. It is the complete opposite of a No Man's Land.

It is for every man. It is an Every Man's Land.

International Rescue Committee

In 1933, Albert Einstein suggested that the American branch of the European-based International Relief Association (IRA) be established to assist Germans suffering under Hitler. In 1940, the Emergency Rescue Committee (ERC) was formed to support the rescue of over 2,000 political, cultural, union, and academic leaders as refugees trapped in Vichy France. In 1942, both committees merged under the name International Rescue Committee (IRC).¹⁸

The IRC works in over 40 countries and 28 cities in America to aid people affected by the world's worst humanitarian crises. Their main goal is to empower people to survive, recover, and rebuild their lives. They provide health, safety, education, economic well-being, and power to those affected by catastrophe or war.¹⁹

This thesis designs around the five given frameworks of health, safety, education, economic well-being, and power through a human-centered design of planning, architecture, and landscape.

¹⁸International Rescue Committee.

¹⁹Ibid.

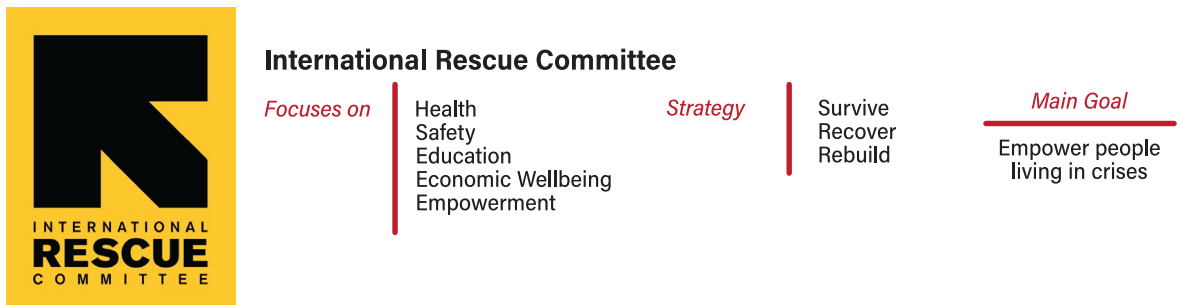


Figure 44 IRC

Program of the Thesis

Focusing on health - Nourishing the asylum seekers with proper food, housing, clothing, medical assistance

Focusing on safety - Understanding the impact of what an asylum seeker is potentially going through and how to create protective, quiet, private spaces in response to it

Focusing on education - Emphasis on quality spaces, informal indoor and outdoor community classrooms for an inclusive environment to learn

Focusing on economic well-being - Assisting people to realistic and achievable career paths

Focusing on empowerment - Classrooms and safe spaces to inform them of their rights

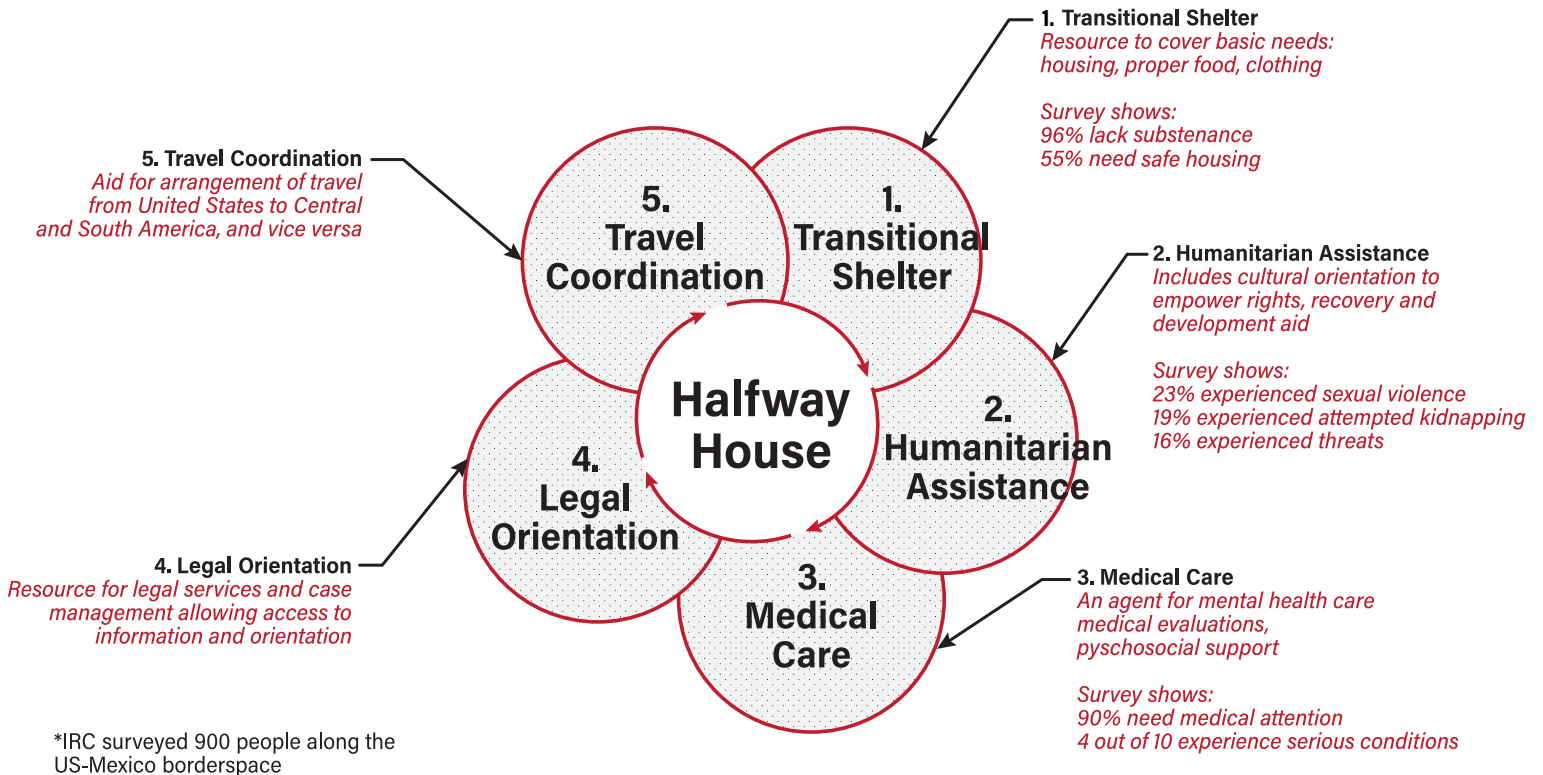


Figure 45 Site Program



Laredo, Texas Commentary

Visiting Laredo was one of my larger ambitions for this thesis; I had been researching Laredo, Texas and Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas for at least four months, when I questioned if it were possible to fly to Laredo and Nuevo Laredo and see it for myself.

Truthfully, I was naive. As an international student from the Philippines, I am familiar with what life looks like under poverty and strife. To an extent, I was somewhat aware of the impoverished state of Laredo with 30% of its population living below the poverty line. I thought I could visit Nuevo Laredo but as soon as I suggested my idea to my committee and family, it was obvious that it was unsafe to do so.

My dream started to fall into place when I brought up the idea to my boyfriend's mom Peggy and step-mom Anne (yes, they are good friends) and surprisingly, they liked the idea of coming with me to do my research and explore a new town together. We booked our flights and lodging to Laredo, arrived in February 2023, and *had the trip of a lifetime*.

Figure 46 Top Left Welcome to Laredo

Figure 47 Bottom Left View of the Borderplex from the plane



Figure 48 Left San Agustin Church

The town was quaint and quiet, almost eerie if we're being honest. It was mostly empty, and the number of pedestrians we saw during the day on the streets was less than the fingers on our hands. Border patrol agents routinely strolled around the area, not entirely vigilant, paying more attention to their cell phones. The streets, intersections and parks were empty during the day. No trace of other people.

It looks and feels like Mexican Architecture yet all the streets are named after political figures from America. It's beautiful despite being run down. We lost count of how many empty and abandoned buildings there are.



Figure 49 Top Left Building across San Agustin Plaza

Figure 50 Top Right The Tack Room

Figure 51 Bottom Left La Posada Alley

Figure 52 Bottom Right Abandoned Building



Figure 53 Top Left Old City Hall

Figure 54 Top Right Inside San Agustin Church

Figure 55 Bottom Iconic Plaza



Walking around felt extremely safe. I wonder if it was because it was empty and if I would have still felt safe if it was crowded.

Figure 56 Top Colorful Figurines
Figure 57 Bottom Breezeblocks





Figure 58 Top Left San Agustin Church
Figure 59 Bottom Left Mexican License Plate
Figure 60 Right San Agustin Plaza; people waiting



We headed to the plaza of San Agustin, the oldest Church in the town of Laredo, and finally caught a glimpse of people. All seem like they are waiting for something. Just sitting down with large bags on their feet. We've come to notice that they were waiting for their ride, and quickly we understood it was to cross the border. Ah, they live in Nuevo Laredo.

The streets are empty but the San Agustin plaza never stays unoccupied. People waiting, people coming and going. We easily are reminded that hundreds of people will do this every single day. People can live in Laredo and go to Nuevo Laredo for the day to work, visit family, and vice versa, people can live in Nuevo Laredo and go to Laredo to work, etc.

We were shown glimpses of daily life of how people negotiate with the border every single day.

Figure 61 Top Left Man waiting for his ride by the Plaza
Figure 62 Bottom Left Overlooking the Plaza from the Tack Room



We followed the trail from the Las Palmas Bird Sanctuary and found our way walking towards the island. A small path allowed us to cross the Rio Grande, letting us finally step foot onto the island (See figures 88 and 91). We found out through locals that in 2019 the whole frontage of Laredo towards the Rio Grande has been stripped of its hundred-year-old matured trees, exactly where the island is, to better see the illegal apprehensions coming from the Rio Grande. Only one tree remains. What a shame.

I received a text from Verizon when I stepped onto the island, notifying me that my cellular service had been disrupted, having crossed the border to Mexico. Peggy, who is a fan of birding uses an app called "Merlin Bird ID" had also automatically switched to Nuevo Laredo.

Figure 63 Top Left Border Patrol Agents-most of them sitting inside their vehicles
Figure 64 Bottom Left Walking toward the island

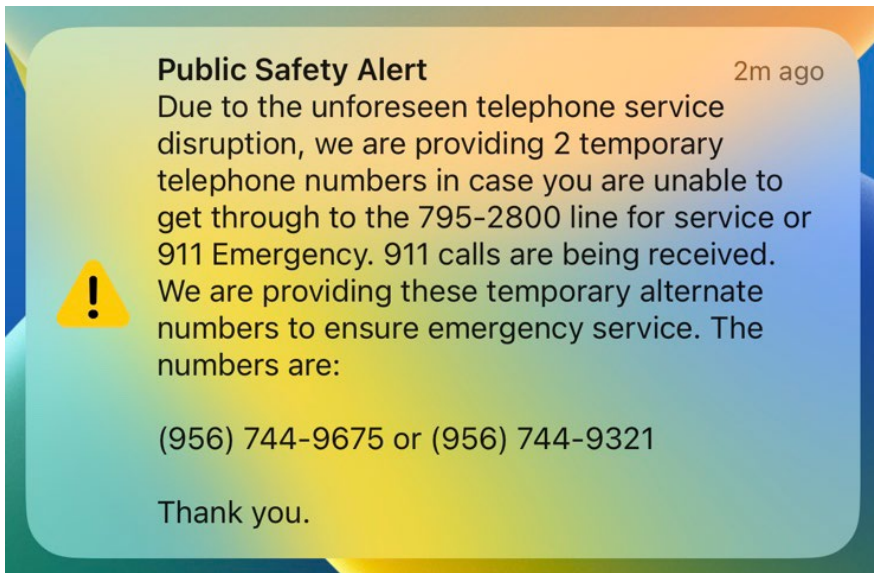
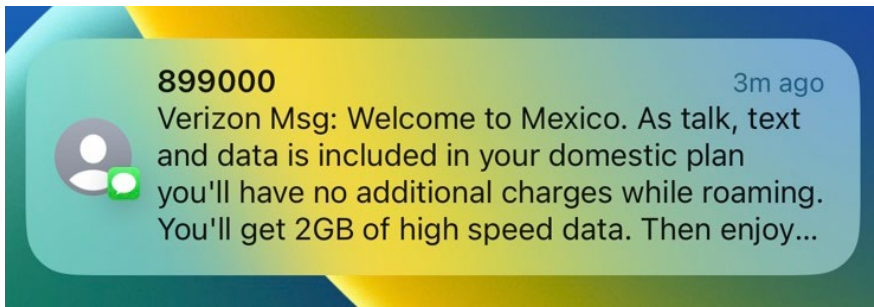


Figure 65 Top Left Merlin Bird App pinging in from Nuevo Laredo

Figure 66 Middle Left Welcome to Mexico text

Figure 67 Bottom Left Public Safety Alert we all received

Figure 68 Top Right Pathway to the island

Figure 69 Bottom Right Sensor machines







Comparing it to all the satellite images I had seen, the Rio Grande closer to the side of Laredo does not look grand at all from any of these angles. Rio Pequeño.

On February 25 2023, Anne, Peggy and I explored the island to gather information and data about its context, the physical and contextual nature of the island itself as well as its surroundings and relationship with the USA and Mexico. What follows is a narrative of our experience walking closer to the Rio Grande on the side of Nuevo Laredo. A border patrol agent drove close to us. I froze.

"We're just birding!" Anne said.

The Border Patrol agent replied:

"Oh I know! It's just that the Government doesn't want you on the island. You have to get off of the island." He then gestured in a general area of what he described as surveillance cameras that were invisible to the naked eye.

Interestingly, he kept calling it the island.

Figure 70 Top Left Rio Grande towards Laredo 1

Figure 71 Bottom Left Rio Grande towards Laredo 2

Figure 72 Right Children playing by the Rio Grande on the Mexican side



The island is relatively flat, it spans approximately 1,460 feet in length and 615 feet in width. Now covered in sand, gravel, and patches of grass, the island has close views of both Laredo and Nuevo Laredo. The Rio Grande separates it from the borderplex, from both ends, Laredo is less than 200 feet away and Nuevo Laredo is 380 feet away. The bathymetry of the Rio Grande does not go deeper than 16 feet and flows toward the Gulf of Mexico.

We were especially excited to visit the adjacent park from the island. It is Laredo's first Natural Landmark, the Las Palmas Nature Preserve and Bird Sanctuary. Many locals from Laredo are not aware of, or avoid the preserve due to its proximity to the border. The Laredo Borderplex is on the pathway for bird migration from South and Central America to North America.

Figure 73 Top Left The island overlooking the Rio Grande and Nuevo Laredo

Figure 74 Top Middle Left Remaining tree

Figure 75 Top Middle Right What's left of the island

Figure 76 Top Right Nuevo Laredo is less than 400 feet away

Figure 77 Right Rear Houses overlooking Laredo from the island





We found stray blood-stained clothes along the border. It was difficult to think that this was owned by somebody who had to cross. Questions started pouring in—where is this person now?

Are they safe? Why did they flee?

Figure 78 Top Left Blood-stained clothes left on the border
Figure 79 Bottom Left Clothes left on the border



Figure 80 A glove left on the border





In the Museum of Borders, we meet Eduardo "Lalo," a young man in his twenties living in Laredo. We asked him questions about the twin-sister city. We wanted to know more about Laredo, and his perspective on his town. We wondered why the town seemed so quiet and empty. His response?

He said that Nuevo Laredo has adapted to the lack of air conditioning. People are dependent on staying outside in the breeze or shade to remain cool. Culturally, the general populace has developed a preference for this lifestyle, due to the interaction with nature it provides. The side of Laredo is so conditioned to air conditioning, that people will always prefer to stay inside their homes or buildings.

The young man went on to say that the two towns are intertwined with each other. One River. One Home. They are from the same ancestors and it's considered the same, continuous, area, despite the border.

He asked us if we had noticed anything about the River. We replied that we saw the Mexicans close to the river and yet, in our visit to our site, only Border Patrol Agents patrolled the American side. The young man attributed this to Laredo always turning their back to the River. He explained that most establishments along the river coast have their rear facades facing the river—it was true. The case is different for Nuevo Laredo, families gather close to the river—enjoying their time, playing under the sun, and barbecuing with other families. They enjoy the River, it brings them happiness. Lalo rhetorically questions himself, if it is One Home, One River, then why does one face it and the other turn their back to the river?

Figure 81 Top Left Heading towards Juarez Lincoln International Bridge
Figure 82 Bottom Left Gorgeous sunset by our lodging

OUR STORY IS OUR POWER

NUESTRA HISTORIA



Figure 83 Our Story is our Power mural







Figure 84 Top Left Peggy

Figure 85 Top Middle Left Anne

Figure 86 Bottom Left Peggy and Anne on site birding

Figure 87 Top Right Overlooking the Plaza





Figure 88 Top Left Entrance to Las Palmas Sanctuary and the site

Figure 89 Bottom Left Outside the San Agustin Church

Figure 90 Top Right Peggy and Anne exiting the island

Figure 91 Bottom Right Author at the start of the trail





PART III

DESIGN



Objectives

1. **Deconstruct the meaning of a door** – Where the power of the wall is to deny, the power of the door is to permit, and allow entry²⁰

2. **Acknowledge the gap** – Opening up the borderspace to create a threshold between now and then, us and them, and create a shared borderspace that acknowledges the gap between different places, people, and times.

3. **Make it a space of remembrance** – Materializing the good, the bad, and the ugly.

²⁰Unwin, Simon. (2007). Doorway.

Woman; 24
Daughter; 6



Fleeing El Salvador due to forced smuggling

No.
Unfortunately turned away



Arrives to Thickened Border as an affirmative qualification

Woman & Daughter

TRANSITIONAL SHELTER

• Immediate medical assistance

• Case management

• Mental health care

• Recovery development

• Community-based education:
-learning English
-cultural orientation

• Travel coordination to the next
safeway house / known relatives



• Travel coordination to the next safeway
house / known relatives

• Community-based education:
-Learning Spanish

• Psychosocial support

• Case management

Young adult



Young adult; 18

Came to America at 3 years
old-Dreamer



Caught using
recreational marijuana in Texas

IFICATION PROCESS

- Left home country
- Travels extensively
- Immediately assessed



Man; 58
 Woman; 56
 Son; 8
 Son; 7
 Fleeing Mexico due to gang violence

CREDIBLE FEAR?

Yes.

Travel coordination to the next
 safeway house / known relatives

Immediate medical assistance

Case management

Community-based education:
 -Finding a realistic career path
 -Learning English
 -Trade specific skills

Community-based education:
 -Finding a realistic career path

Mental health care

Case management

Travel coordination to the next safeway
 house / known relatives

Man

Family

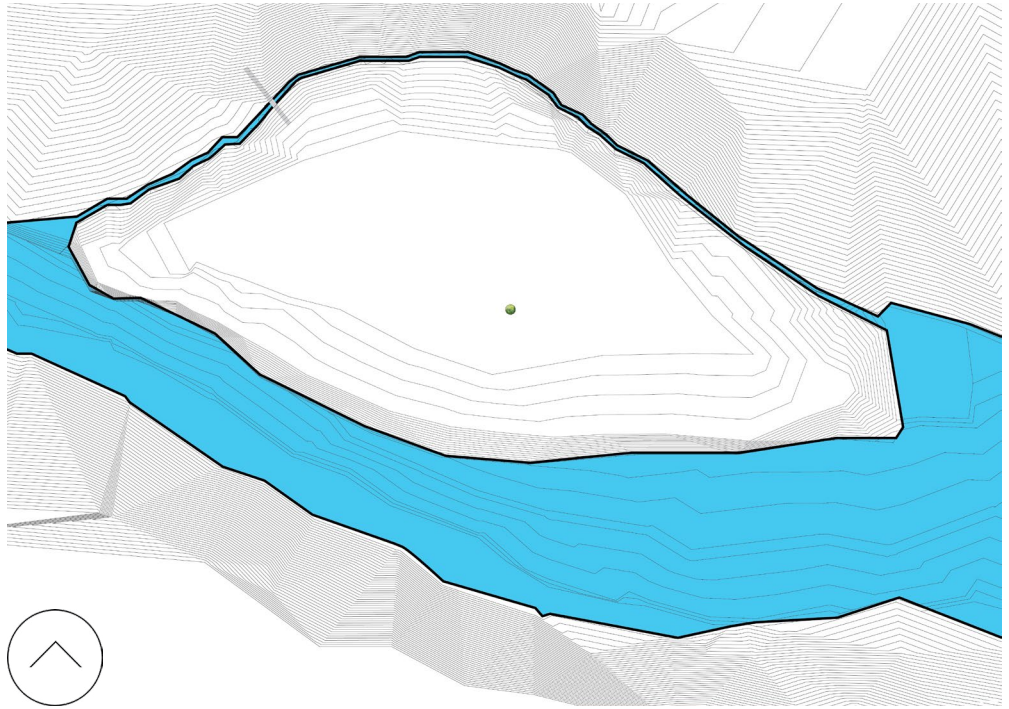
TRANSITIONAL SHELTER

- Immediately assessed
- Travels to the border
- Recommended by IRC to be moved to the Thickened Border
- Placement in Removal Proceedings (Deportation)
- Detained by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE)

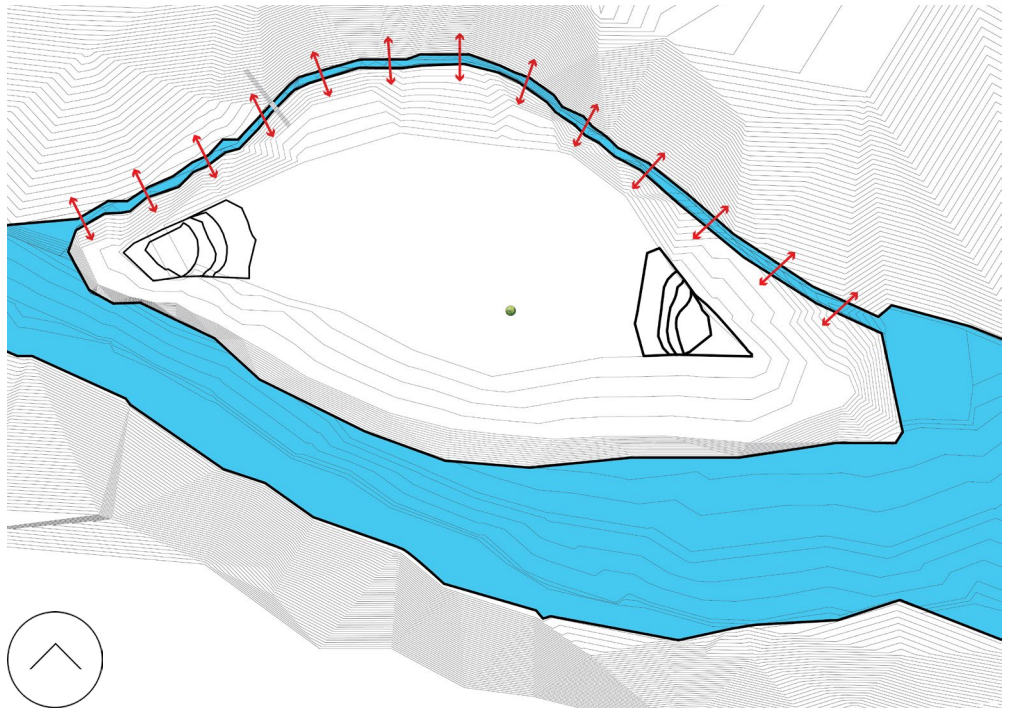


Man; 45
 Came to America 20 years ago;
 undocumented
 Was caught during a workplace
 raid in Texas

IFICATION PROCESS



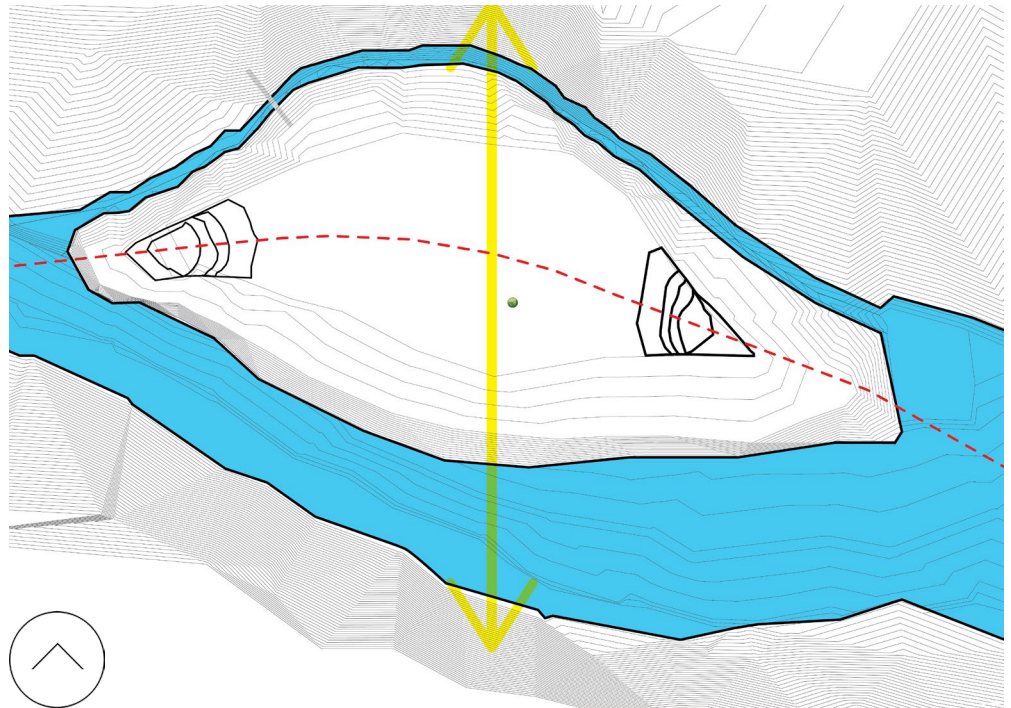
1.
Existing Site



2.
Dredging the upper portion
of the island to widen the
Rio Grande + Mounding the
edges from the excavated
sediments



3.
Acknowledging the 1955
border and North-South
orientation that intersects it



4.
Creating a gap from the
shared borderspace by
a water feature that
accumulates rainwater
from the mound edges of
the island. Placing stepping
stones on the North-South
orientation to allow the
asylum seekers to walk
towards the Rio Grande.

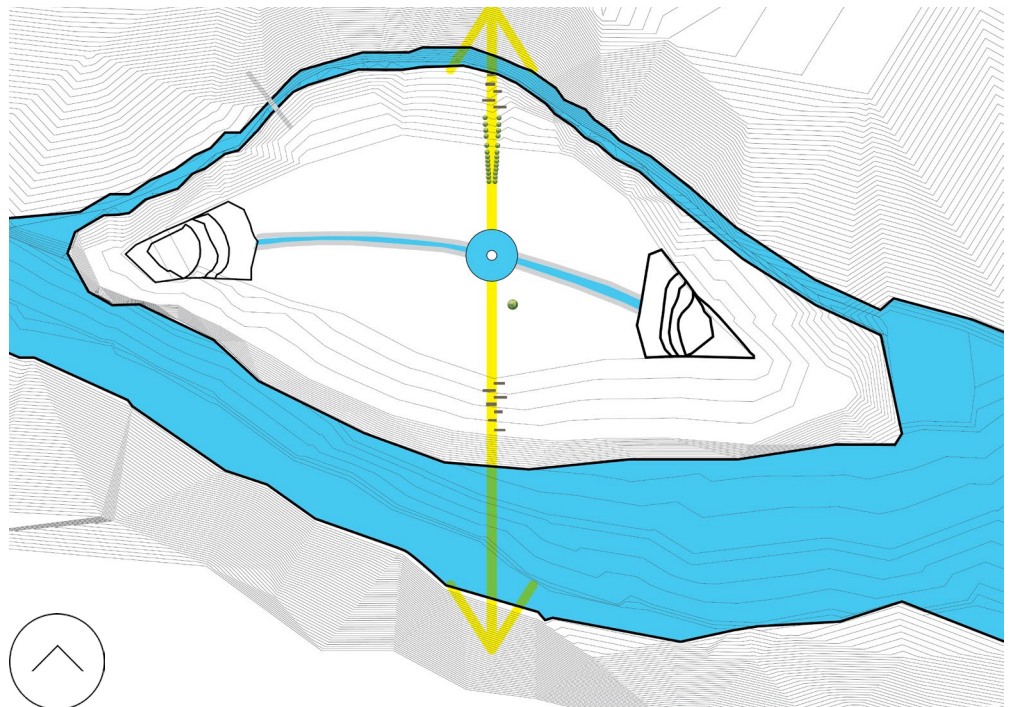
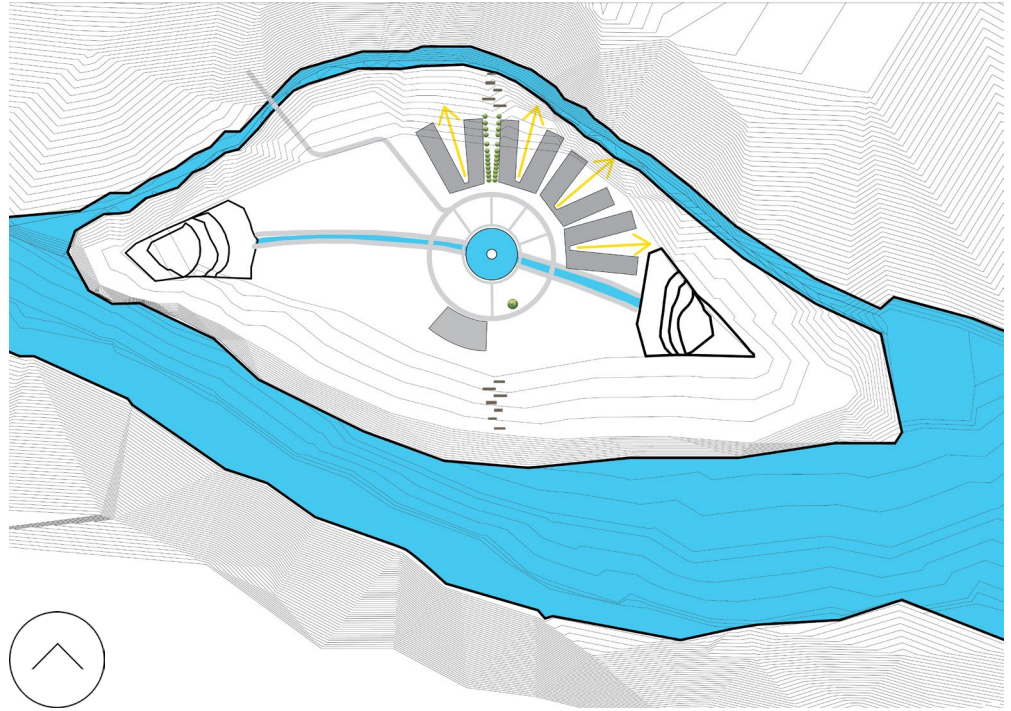
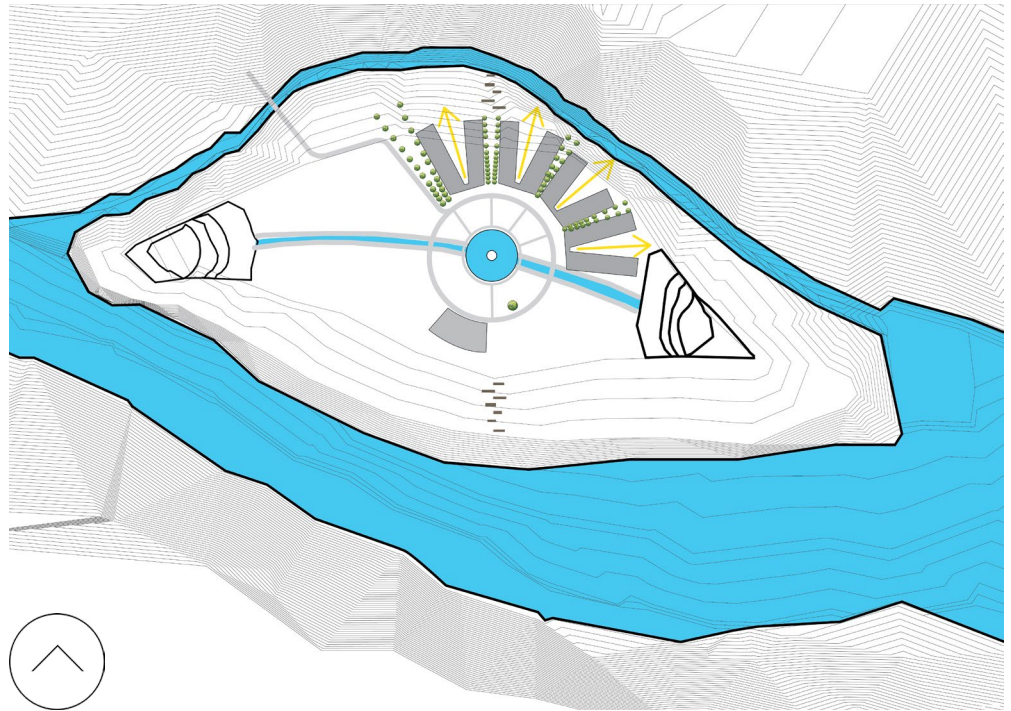


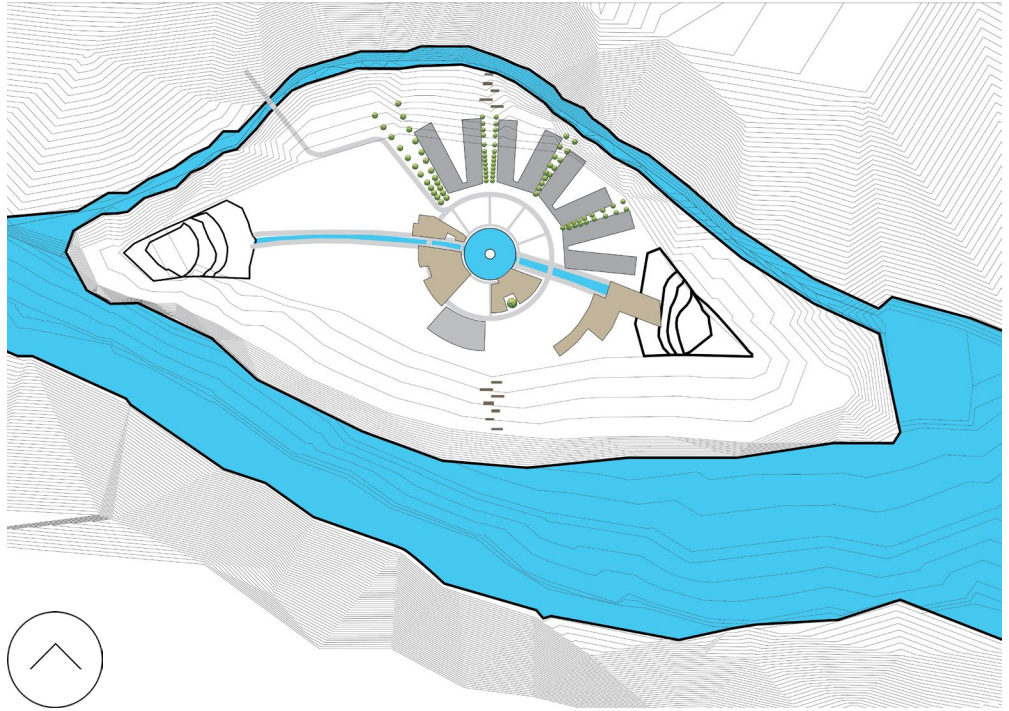
Figure 94 Site Diagrams 1

5.
Establishing a radial
network with the
transitional shelters
radiating the outer core

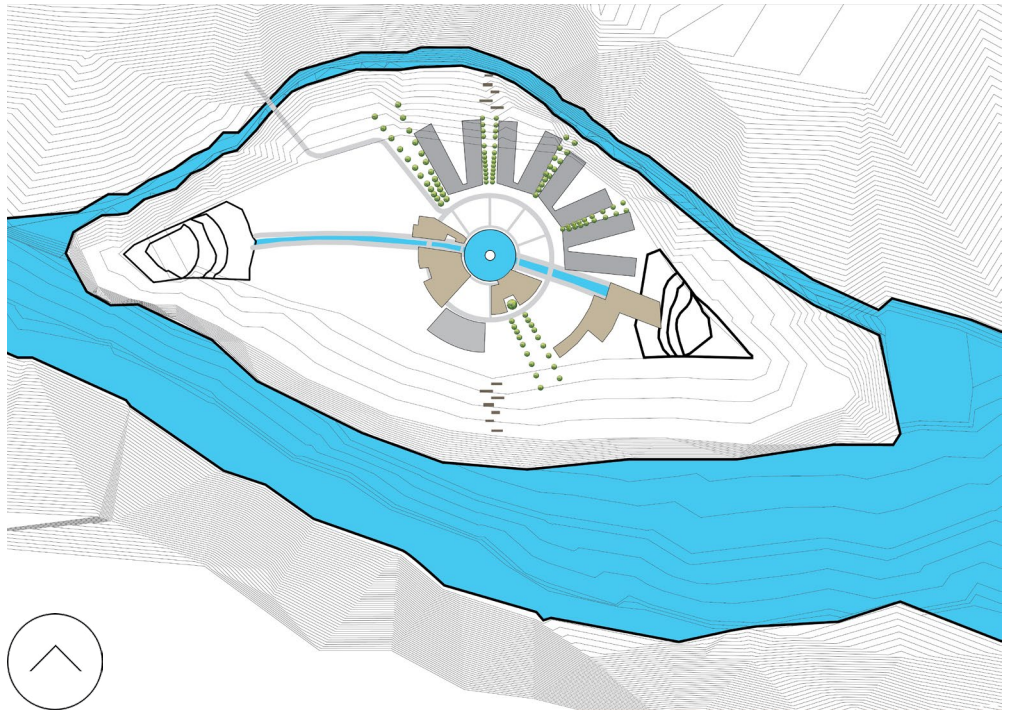


6.
Replanting the trees through
an arcaded treeline to
extend the views towards
the Rio Grande



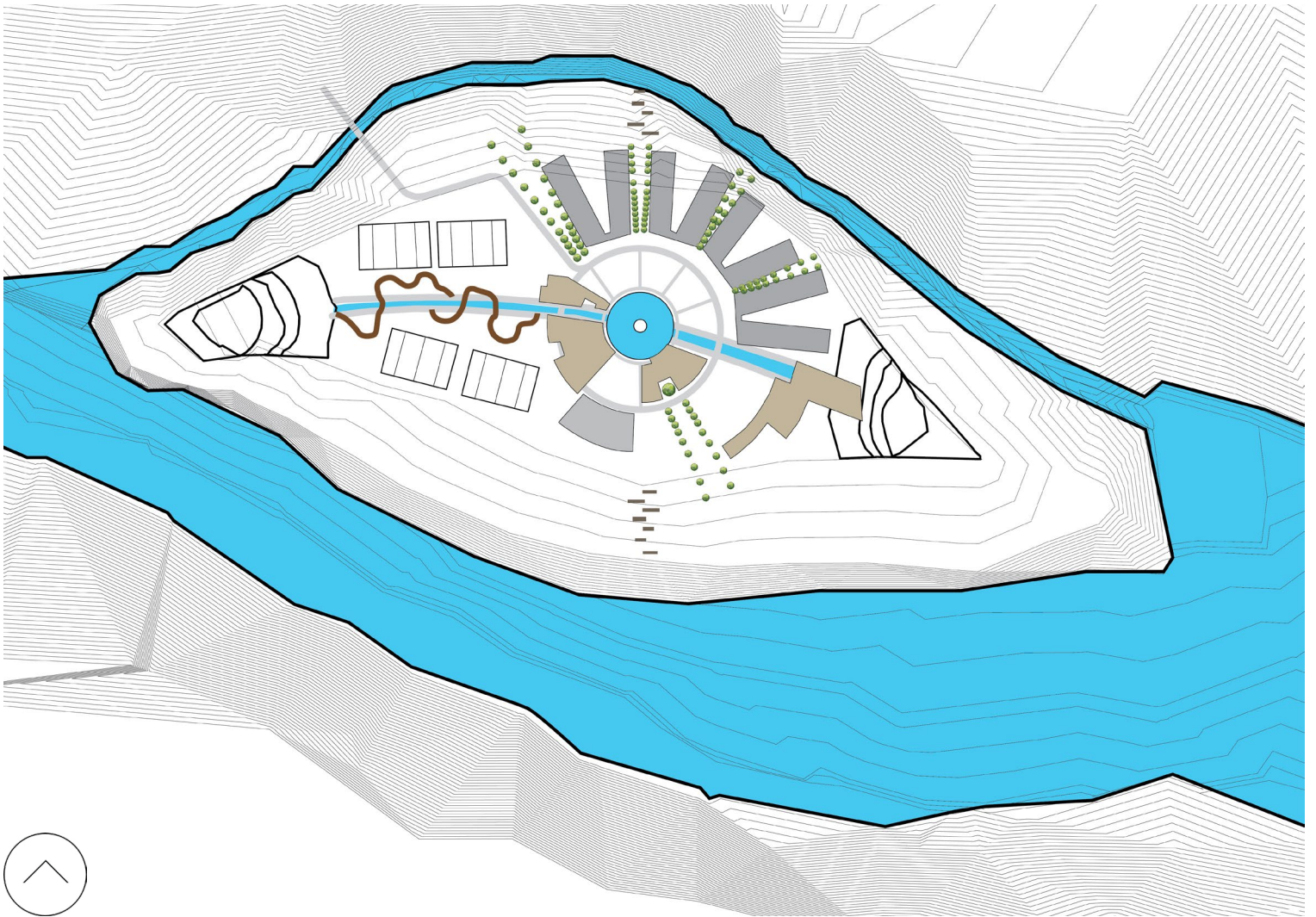


7.
Supporting facilities placed
on the interior core



8.
Adding another arcade of
trees to the sole tree left
during the 2019
deforestation.

Figure 95 Site Diagrams 2



9.
Building an up-and-down bridge and (4) 7 per team football fields at the west portion of the island to allow the users to enjoy and play during their stay.



10.
Replanting the trees around the island as part of a reforestation effort.

Figure 96 Site Diagrams 3



MASTER PLAN ON SITE



LEGEND

- 1 - USA Entry / Exit
- 2 - MEX Entry / Exit
- 3 - Single Adult - Male
- 4 - Single Adult - Female
- 5 - Small Families
- 6 - Large Families
- 7 - Community Classrooms
- 8 - Community Hall
- 9 - Kitchen Hall
- 10 - Unaccompanied Minors
- 11 - Medical Aid / Legal Assistance /
Travel Coordination

There is a poetic power of movement in the spatial organization of the Rio Grande Arrival/Departure Shelter.

Movement through the spaces conveys freedom with restrictions in regard to respect for their fellow asylum seekers. One may walk freely around the island, follow the path of the 1955 border through walking along the water feature, explore the up-and-down bridges by the west field, play football in any of the courts, stand in the portals at the North-South orientation to overlook Laredo or Nuevo Laredo, relax in the central courtyard, play along the shallow pond or visit any of the communal halls.

Housing is restricted and separated into five separate housing complexes, each for the different types of asylum seekers: single adults for males, single adults for females, smaller families (2-3 persons), larger families (5-6 persons), and for unaccompanied minors.

Changes in the floor patterns and materials are located throughout the whole island to signify different functions and access. For public communal spaces, the floor is made of concrete wash with medium aggregate which can expect heavy traffic of people and withstand wear. In addition, the dining hall, community hall, and community rooms have impermeable concrete tile floors.

Shared central courtyard floors within each shelter complex are a concrete wash with smaller aggregate. The private bedroom floors within the complex are polished concrete. Here they can feel most at home, feeling the soft surface while barefoot and grounded to their units.

Figure 97 Master Plan on Site



AMERICA

LIMINAL SPACE

LAREDO ENTRY/EXIT

RIO GRANDE

**THE RIO GRANDE
ARRIVAL/DEPARTURE SHELTER
(HALFWAY HOUSE)**

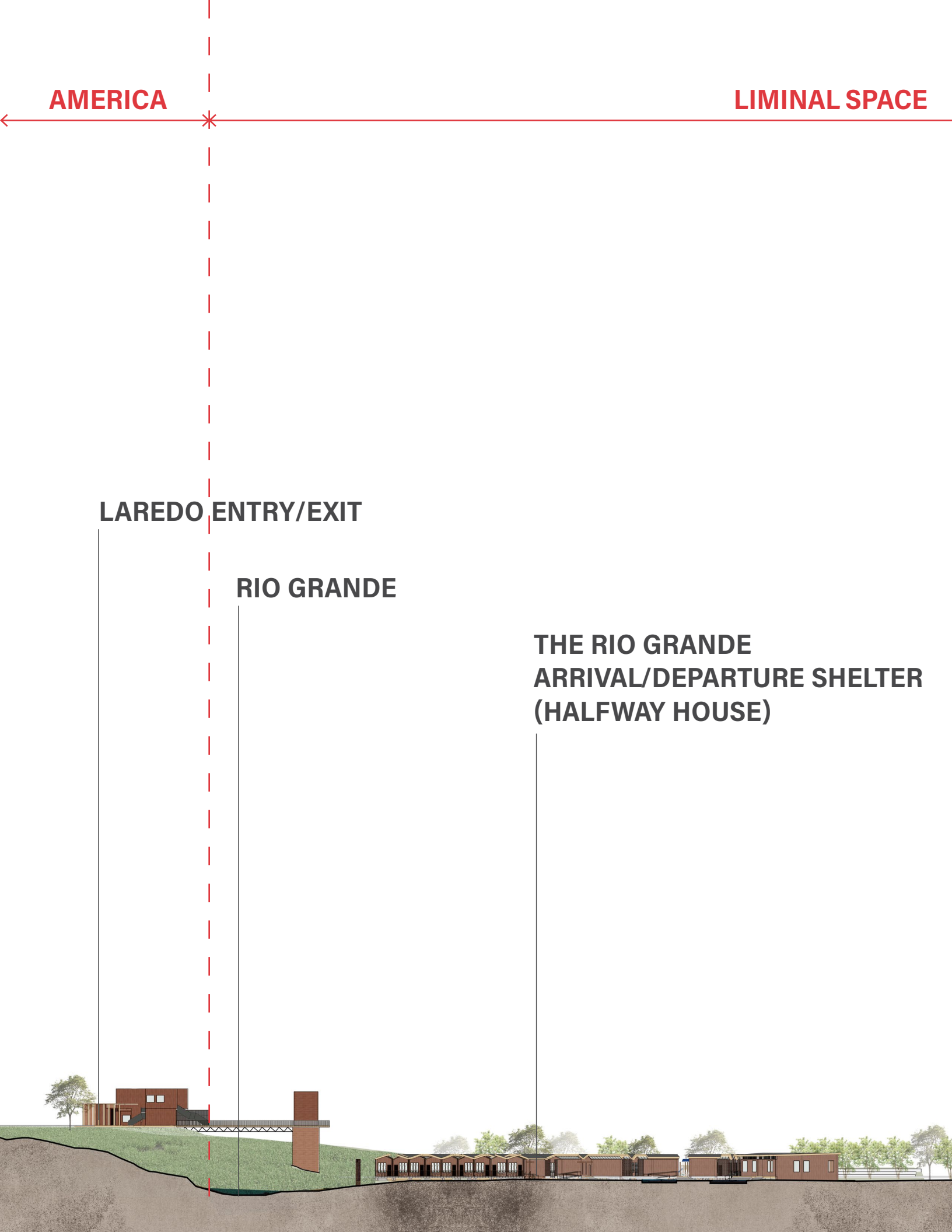
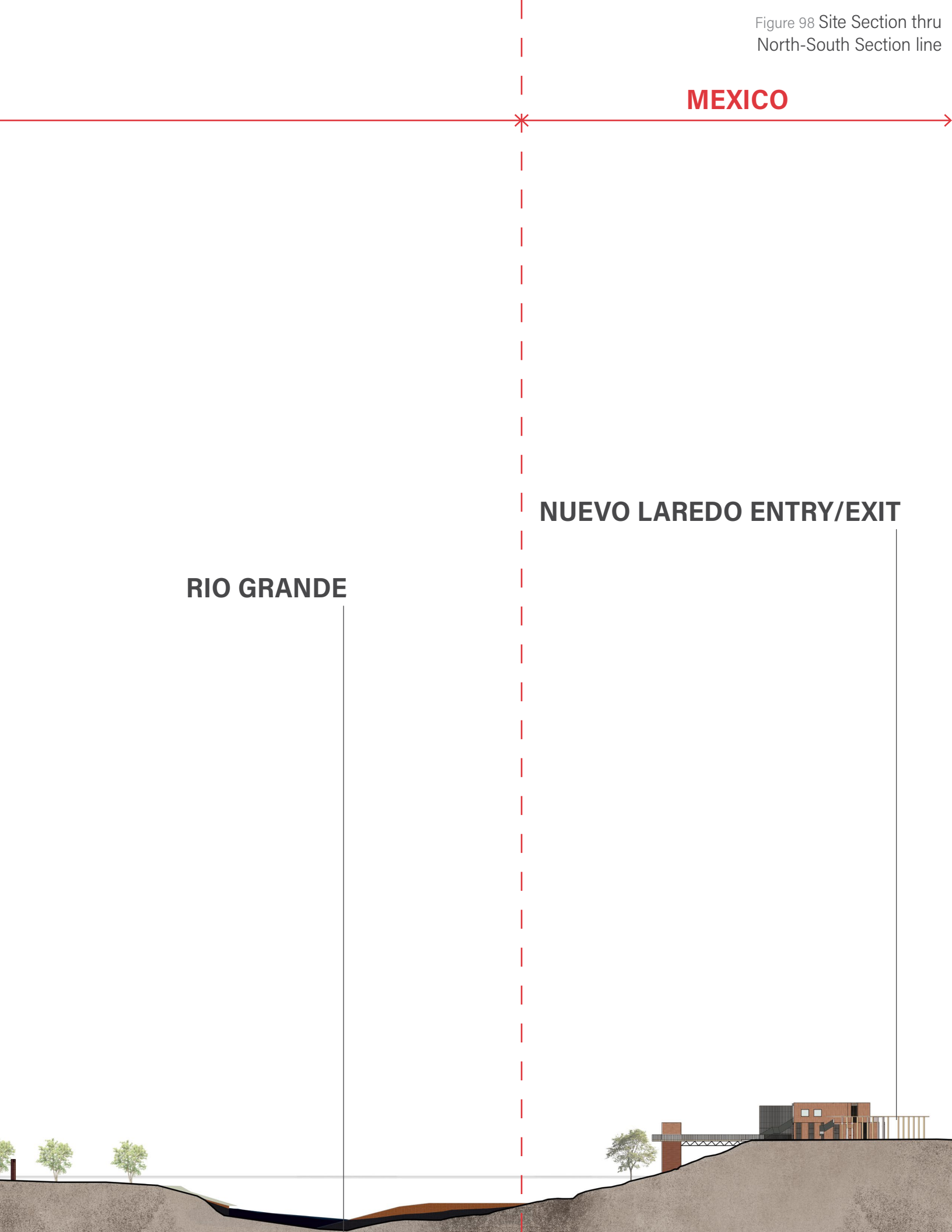


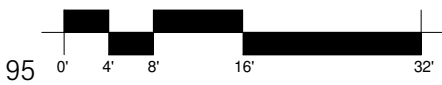
Figure 98 Site Section thru
North-South Section line

MEXICO

RIO GRANDE

NUEVO LAREDO ENTRY/EXIT





SINGLE ADULT HOUSING (PROTOTYPE) PLAN



Single Adult Housing

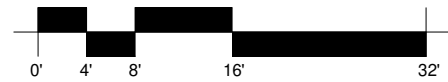
The entryway is intentionally narrow, no less than 6 ft. It creates a portal that subtly forces those entering and exiting to communicate with each other, whether with a smile, a nod or a hello. Any sort of interaction is helpful. Letting them have the opportunity to create relationships in the transitional shelter is essential. Most, if not all of these people are going through the traumatic events of having to flee their homes into the unknown. Creating spaces for interaction gives them the opportunity to know they are not alone in the process of seeking asylum.

Each unit does its best to accommodate the asylum seeker's needs. Giving them their own space to rest, think and grow empowers them. There is a provided outdoor rear porch that is private for their unit, surrounded by breeze blocks and a view of the landscape.

A shared public central courtyard provides asylum seekers the choice of interacting with others within their housing. The courtyard includes shaded canopies, outdoor seating, stepped terraces and expansive views of the Rio Grande and its neighboring city.



SECTION (TYPICAL)



Section

Skylights are provided for each unit that is opposite the beds. Waiting asylum seekers can spend time recovering in their beds, while passing the time. A scenic view of the sky can provide comfort, and inspire.

Elevation

The shelter is built of concrete and masonry with materials readily available and sourced locally. The butterfly roof is made of steel rafters, with tiled shingles and an aluminum-framed skylight. Bricks laid out in an open pattern enclose the rear outdoor porches.

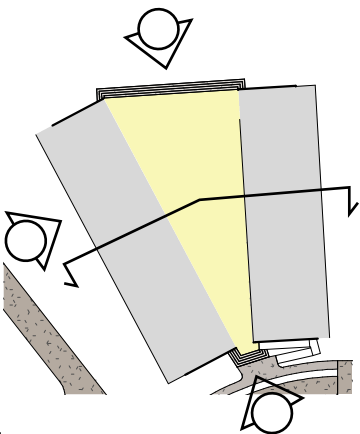
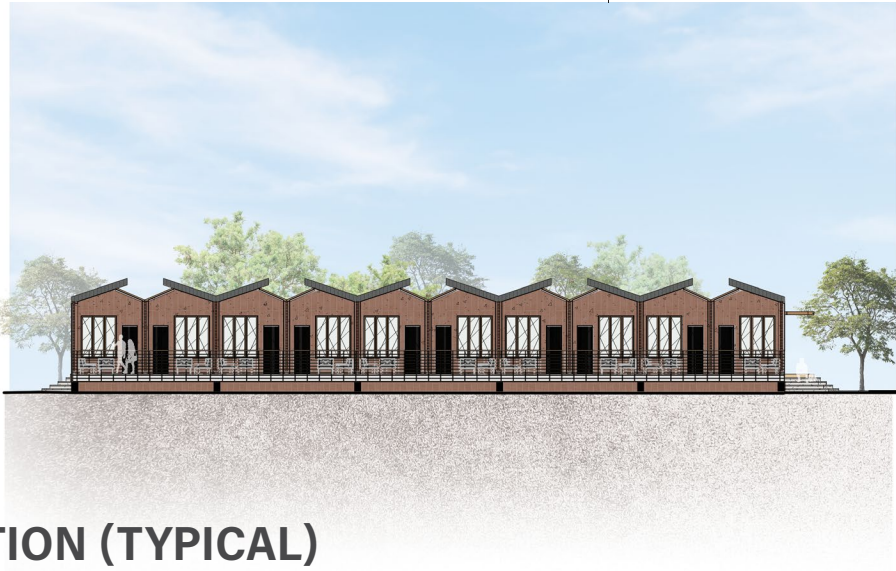


Figure 100 Section, Single Adult Housing
 Figure 101 North elevation, Single Adult Housing
 Figure 102 West elevation, Single Adult Housing
 Figure 103 South elevation, Single Adult Housing



NORTH ELEVATION (TYPICAL)



WEST ELEVATION (TYPICAL)



SOUTH ELEVATION (TYPICAL)

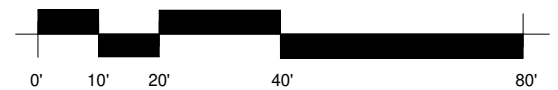




Figure 104



A man going through removal proceedings sits on his provided outdoor rear porch. Hung clothes, stacks of paperwork, and an older bottle of coffee give a glimpse of how lived each unit can be.



Figure 105



A shared public central courtyard where people gather and hang out.



LARGER FAMILY HOUSING FLOOR PLAN



Larger Family Housing

Similar to the other transitional shelters, larger families can enjoy their privacy within the comforts of their own unit. Minor adjustments are provided to accommodate a larger group of people, such as more beds, a larger rear porch and an ensuite bath. For the public central courtyard, an additional sandbar with a playground is located towards the rear courtyard.



SECTION THRU A

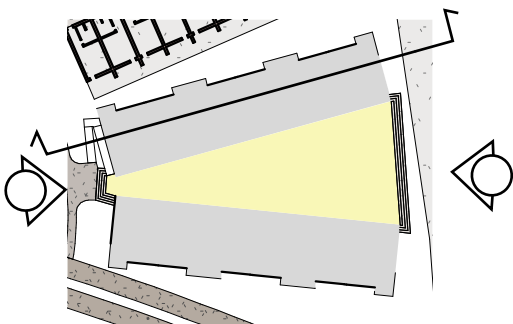
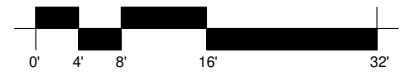


Figure 107 Section, Large Family Housing
 Figure 108 East elevation, Large Family Housing
 Figure 109 West elevation, Large Family Housing



EAST ELEVATION



WEST ELEVATION

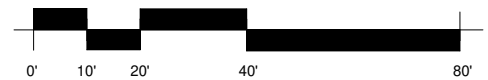




Figure 110



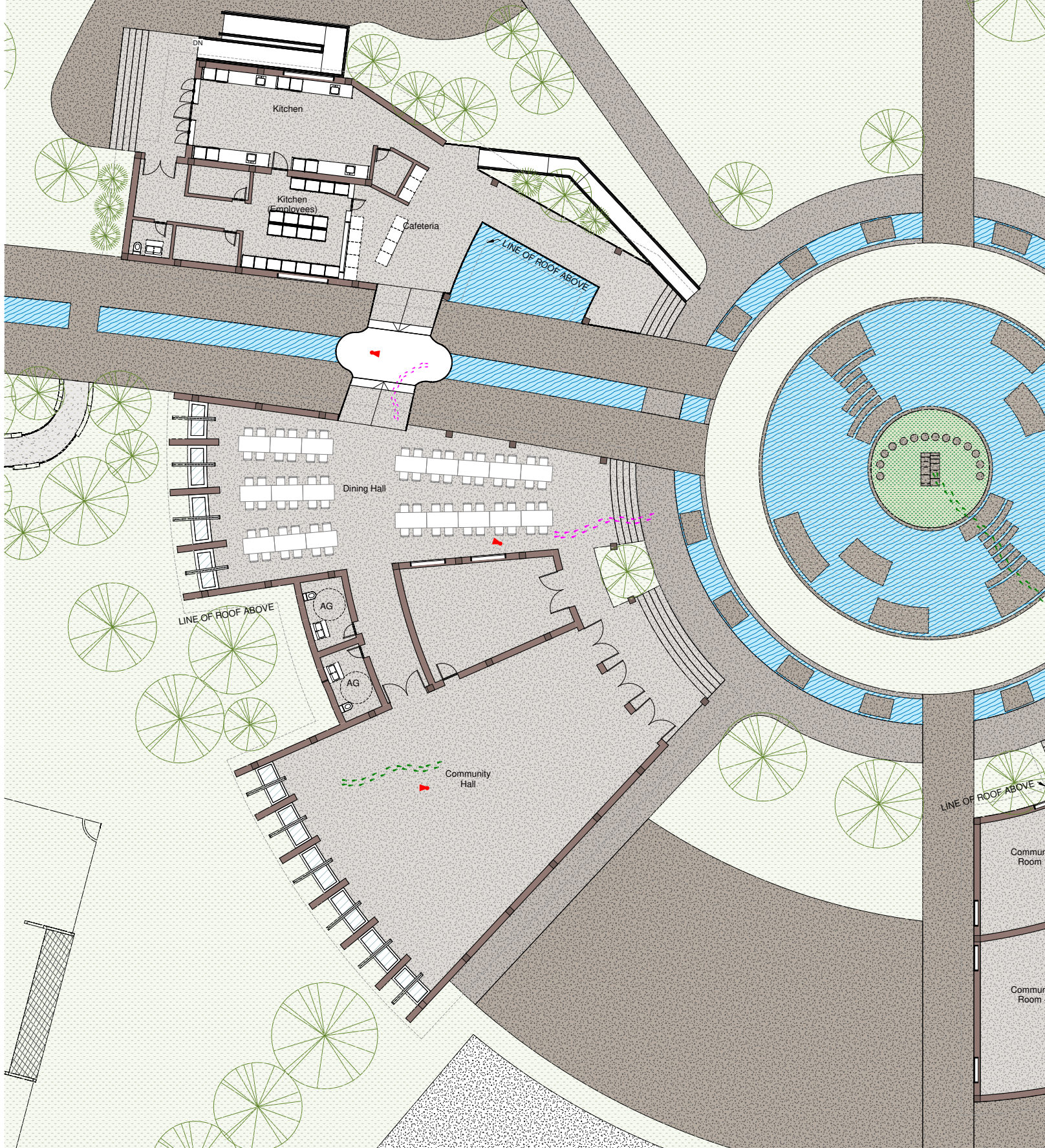
Large Families Housing - A mother hugs her children knowing they are safe.



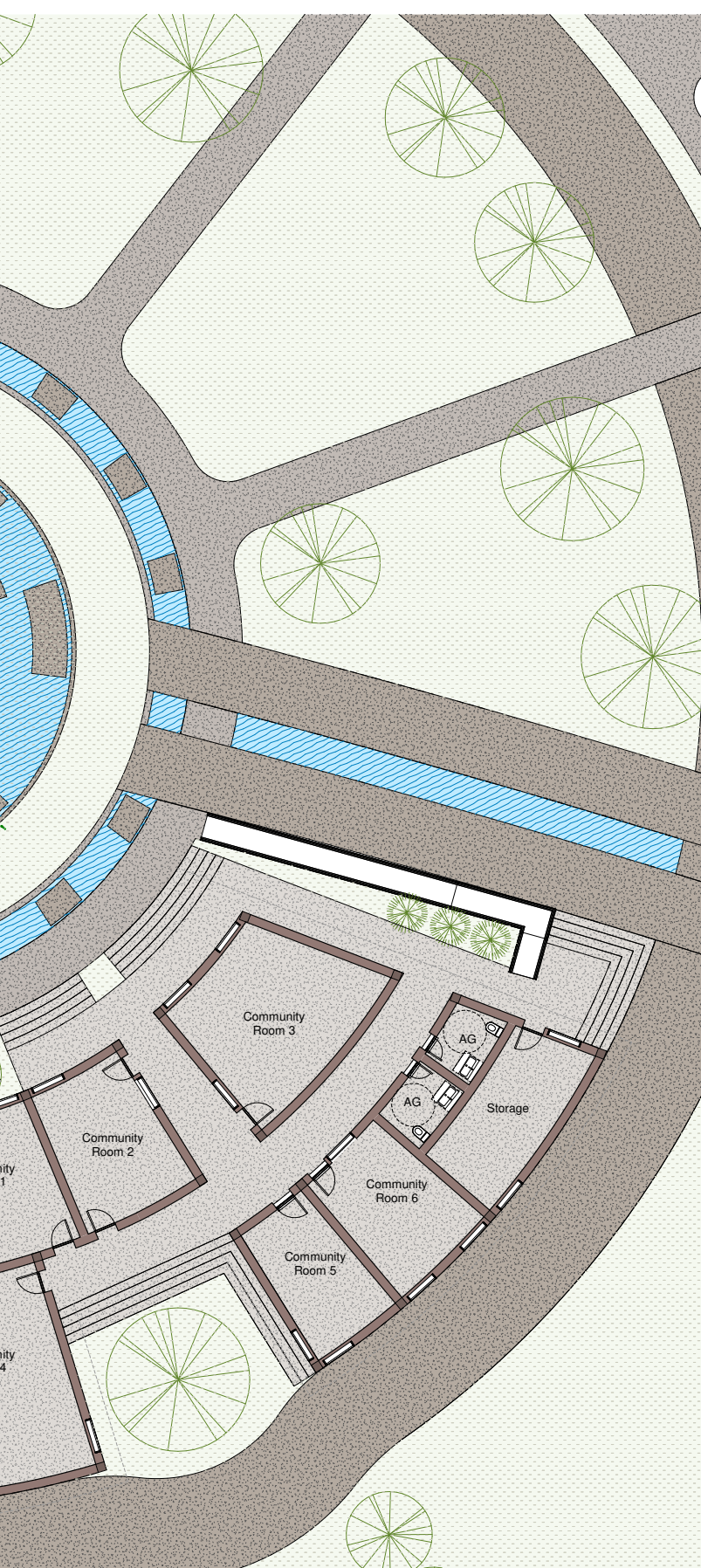
Figure 111



Single Adult Housing - Two men who met in the shelter share their room and their experiences with each other.



COMMUNITY AREAS FLOOR PLAN



Community Areas

A shallow pond and park can be seen on the center of the island, much like a caravanserai, where people can socialize, exchange ideas, culture, and goods. The central courtyard allows people to see almost from all sides of the island, giving them a sense of security and peace.

There is a large dining area with two options for how their food is made. Option one includes a kitchen that is open to all the asylum seekers in the shelter. It not only empowers them but also gives them opportunities to connect themselves with each other when cook, share their recipes and food. This provides them with a sense of stability and normalcy. Option two is a cafeteria style kitchen where the shelter staff prepares meals ready for them to eat thrice a day.

Connecting the kitchen from the dining hall is a ramped bridge that is elevated over the 1955 gap. Here you get a special view of the island from both ends. Adjacent to the dining hall is a large gathering space where the community and shelter can host events, classes, seminars, and workshops.

Empowering their rights, teaching them English, Spanish, trade skills, and advising career paths can be done in the communal rooms southeast of the courtyard. These gatherings are for private, smaller studios while the communal hall is for larger, social affairs.



Figure 112 Communal Areas



WEST ELEVATION - COMMUNITY HALL



SOUTH ELEVATION - COMMUNITY HALL



- Figure 113 West elevation, Community Hall
- Figure 114 South elevation, Community Hall
- Figure 115 South elevation, Community Rooms
- Figure 116 North elevation, Community Rooms



SOUTH ELEVATION - COMMUNITY ROOMS



NORTH ELEVATION - COMMUNITY ROOM

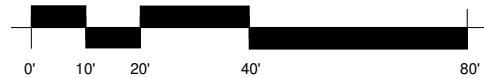




Figure 117



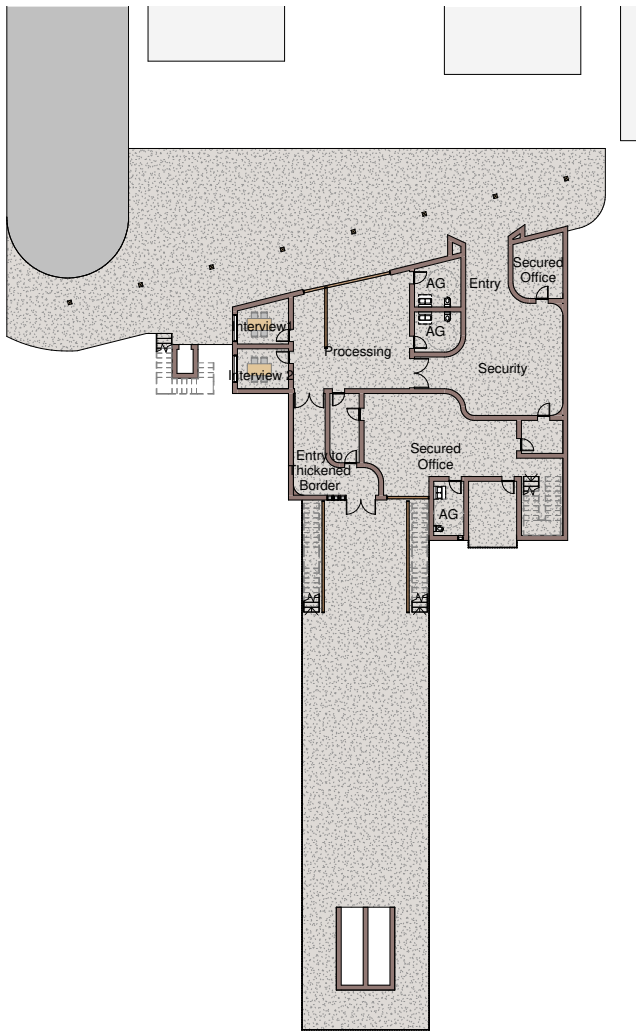
Celebrating her birthday with a small birthday gathering with the other children.



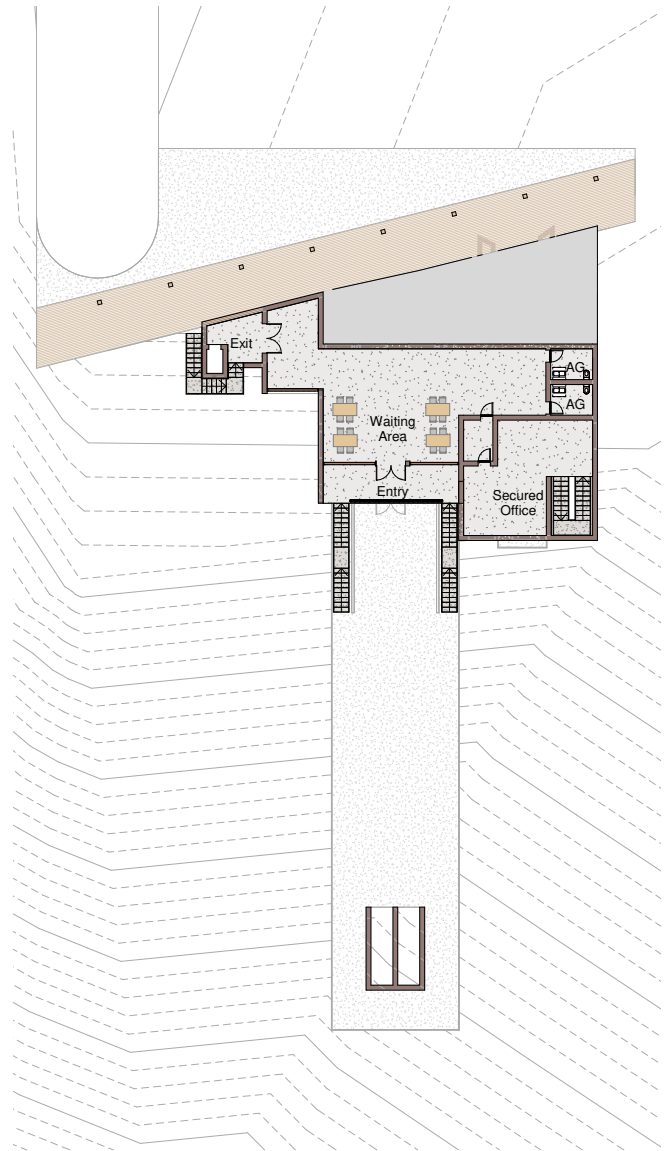
Figure 118



People sharing meals with each other.



LAREDO GROUND FLOOR PLAN



LAREDO SECOND FLOOR PLAN

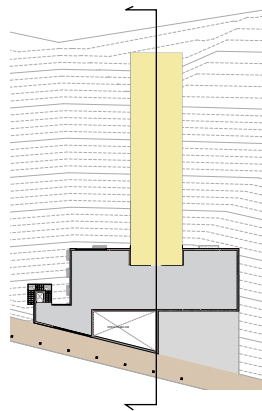
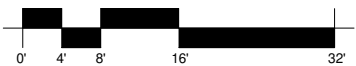
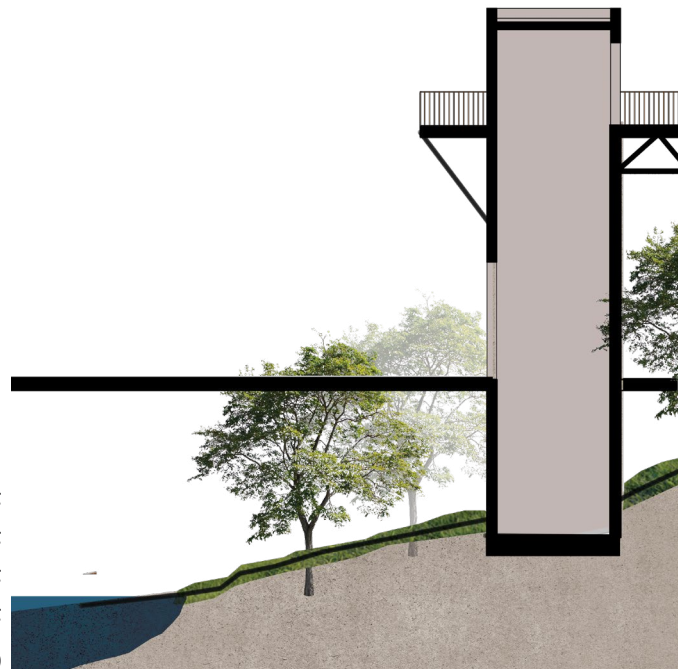
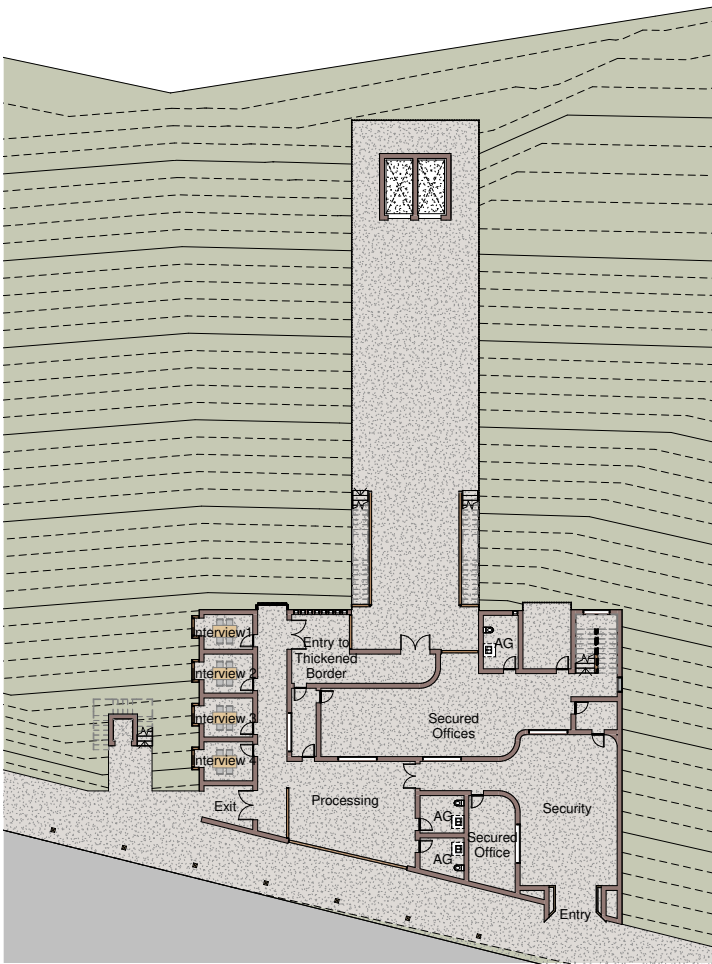
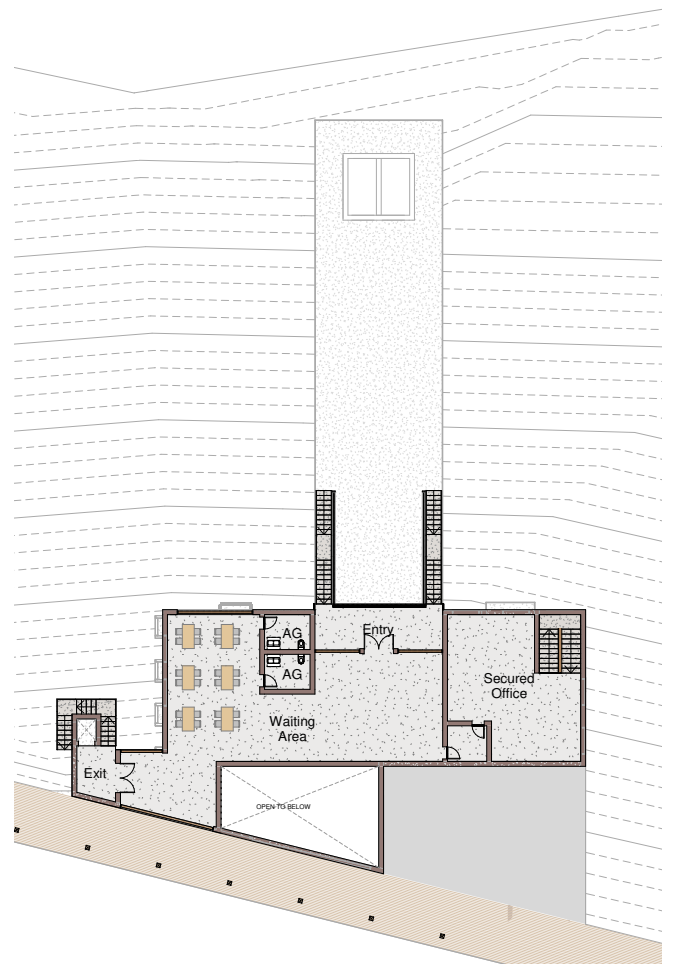


Figure 119 Laredo Entry/Exit G/F
 Figure 120 Laredo Entry/Exit 2/F
 Figure 121 Nuevo Laredo Entry/Exit G/F
 Figure 122 Nuevo Laredo Entry/Exit 2/F
 Figure 123 Section, Nuevo Laredo

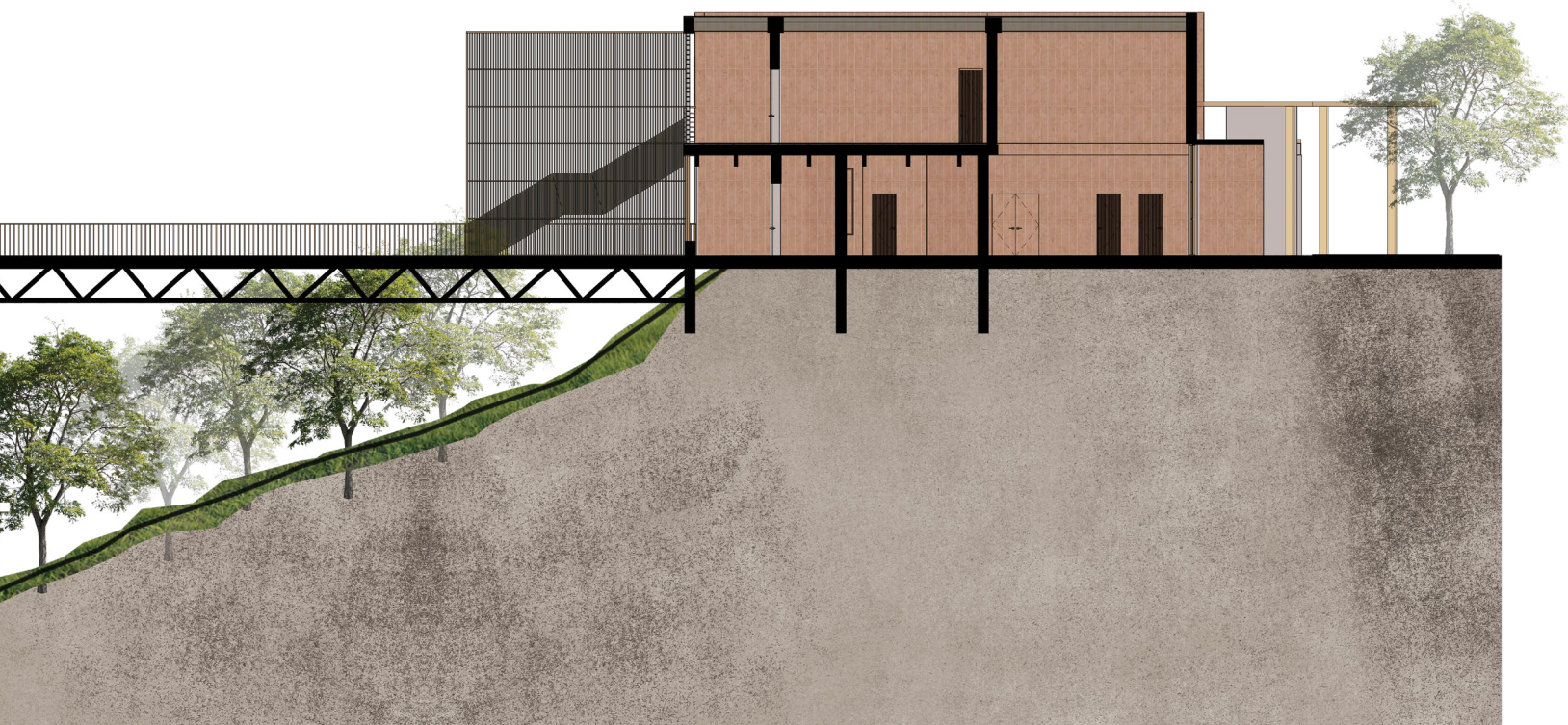




**NUEVO LAREDO
GROUND FLOOR PLAN**



**NUEVO LAREDO
SECOND FLOOR PLAN**



NUEVO LAREDO SECTION



Figure 124 Overlooking the courtyard from the bridge





Figure 125



Meandering up and down bridges by the west field.





A family overlooking Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas.

Only one can assume whether they are looking at where they came from or if they are looking where they are headed to next.

Figure 126

Concluding Thoughts

The thesis considers the borderplex as more than places that close and delimit from one another, but as opportunities to expand into living organic spaces. Borders both delimit and negotiate between two sides of neither a single state nor a single entity. They are thresholds with hundreds of thousands of people negotiating with every single day.

The wall that separates both countries, belongs to both countries.

Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it,
And spills the upper boulders in the sun;
And makes gaps even two can pass abreast.
The work of hunters is another thing:
I have come after them and made repair
Where they have left not one stone on a stone,
But they would have the rabbit out of hiding,
To please the yelping dogs. The gaps I mean,
No one has seen them made or heard them made,
But at spring mending-time we find them there.
I let my neighbor know beyond the hill;
And on a day we meet to walk the line
And set the wall between us once again.
We keep the wall between us as we go.
To each the boulders that have fallen to each.
And some are loaves and some so nearly balls
We have to use a spell to make them balance:
'Stay where you are until our backs are turned!'
We wear our fingers rough with handling them.
Oh, just another kind of out-door game,
One on a side. It comes to little more:
There where it is we do not need the wall:
He is all pine and I am apple orchard.
My apple trees will never get across
And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him.
He only says, 'Good fences make good neighbors.'
Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder
If I could put a notion in his head:
'**Why** do they make good neighbors? Isn't it
Where there are cows? But here there are no cows.
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.
Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That wants it down.' I could say 'Elves' to him,
But it's not elves exactly, and I'd rather
He said it for himself. I see him there
Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top
In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed.
He moves in darkness as it seems to me,
Not of woods only and the shade of trees.
He will not go behind his father's saying,
And he likes having thought of it so well
He says again, 'Good fences make good neighbors.'

Robert Frost, The Mending Wall

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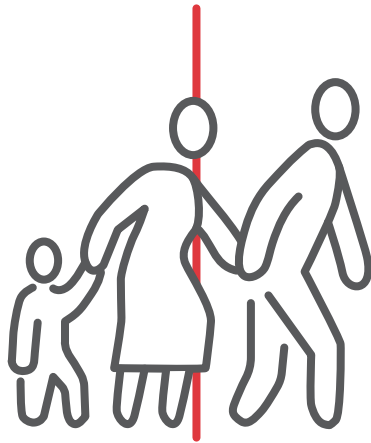
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thank you.

