

The Best Winter Travel  [An insider's guide to the 2006 ski season](#) **The New York Times Travel** nytimes.com/travel

[NYTimes.com](#) Go to a Section

[Log In](#) - [Register Now](#)

SEARCH SPONSORED BY  SEARCH NYT Since 1981

[TimesSelect](#) FREE 14-DAY TRIAL!

[Arts Home](#) [Art & Design](#) [Dance](#) [Music](#) [Television](#) [Columns](#) [Movies](#) [Theater](#)

Shantytowns as a New Suburban Ideal



Courtesy of Teddy Cruz

A model of the Teddy Cruz/Casa Familiar project in San Ysidro, Calif. [More Photos >](#)

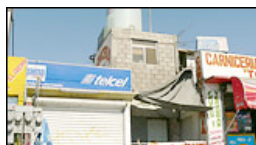
By **NICOLAI OUROUSSOFF**

Published: March 12, 2006

TIJUANA, Mexico — Teddy Cruz has been shuttling between suburban San Diego and the shantytowns of Tijuana for more than a decade now. From anthropologists to urban planners eager for an insider's view, visitors pepper him endlessly with requests for tours.

Multimedia

▶ SLIDE SHOW



[Tijuana's Shantytowns](#)

Readers' Opinions

[Forum: Artists and Exhibitions](#)

[Enlarge This Image](#)



"It's become part of my weekly routine," said Mr. Cruz, a 43-year-old architect, as we raced along a fenced freeway toward the Mexican border. "Most people here haven't even seen the border wall. I want to show people that it's not so ugly."

But Mr. Cruz is more than a tour guide. From London to Tel Aviv to his own borderland stomping ground here, his ideas about Tijuana's hardscrabble settlements have generated a buzz. In a patchwork of plywood hovels, auto repair shops and hasty additions, Mr. Cruz has found a humane model for rethinking America's suburbs.

He has been pushing that vision as an antidote to the gated communities that have sprouted from Southern California to Israel to mainland China in recent years. Ultimately, his ideas could be applied to the new immigrant suburbs of the Midwest or the flood-ruined neighborhoods of New Orleans.

Mr. Cruz's growing cult status may have something to do with post-9/11 realities. As he suggested last year in a talk in London — the Stirling Memorial Lecture, sponsored by the

[Sign In to E-Mail This](#)
[Printer-Friendly](#)
[Reprints](#)
[Save Article](#)



Advertisement



Most E-Mailed Articles The New York Times

[Past 24 Hours](#) | [Past 7 Days](#)

- [The Saturday Profile: For Muslim Who Says Violence Destroys Islam, Violent Threats](#)
 - [Op-Ed Contributor: Defenders of the Faith](#)
 - [Inside the Command | The American Generals' Debate: Dash to Baghdad Left Top U.S. Generals Divided](#)
 - [Paul Krugman: The Right's Man](#)
 - [The New São Paulo](#)
- [Go to Complete List](#)

Technology
nytimes.com/tech

[David Pogue on the new Apple MacBook Pro](#)

Also in Technology:
[Laptops from \\$500-\\$1,000](#)
[Laptops from \\$1,000-\\$1,500](#)
[Laptops over \\$2,000](#)

ADVERTISEMENTS





Courtesy of Teddy Cruz

A rendering of a frame design that could be adapted for various uses.

[More Photos >](#)

Canadian Center for Architecture — America's preoccupation with security has refocused attention on barriers like the 10-foot steel wall between Tijuana and San Diego. Like many other architects, he sees the border clampdown as a threat to the kind of cultural exchange that civilizes and enriches people on both sides.

For Mr. Cruz, the barrier is symptomatic of a mentality that papers over cultural differences rather than mining them for creative inspiration. It's the kind of thinking that has fueled

the global boom in gated suburbs, fortified corporate towers and self-contained shopping enclaves.

"The hardening of the border wall over the past decade coincides with the hardening of attitudes toward public space," said Mr. Cruz, a slight man whose gentle manner masks a racing mind. "It is about policies of exclusion and division. So how do you preserve this heterogeneity?"

The architect himself has long straddled two cultural realities. He was reared in the Guatemalan capital, where his mother ran a chic nightclub. Once arrested for hiding rebel arms in the basement, she married an American businessman and moved to the United States after a military coup in the 1980's, settling in San Diego.

Mr. Cruz, then 20, spoke little English; eventually he left to study architecture at Cal Poly in San Luis Obispo, Calif., and was awarded the prestigious Rome Prize, an academic fellowship in Italy. Returning in the early 1990's, he became fixated on an 80-square-mile area straddling the Mexican border.

"When I came back from Rome I wanted to reconnect to Latin America," he said. "I was starting a new family. I started trying to connect all the dots, to look at the area with a more critical eye. To me, Tijuana was where the entire continent of Latin America washed up against this great big wall."

His timing was prescient. After the North American Free Trade Agreement took effect in 1994, he watched as a ring of new factories sprang up around Tijuana — enormous blank boxes with trim lawns and neat rows of palm trees — along with American-style subdivisions with the rigid regularity of tombstones. Something in him rebelled.

"To me, this was part of an entire history, the kind you always find in Latin America — continually copying patterns from the West as symbols of progress," Mr. Cruz said. "In Guatemala, we had an Avenue de le Reforma, which was a copy of a Mexican boulevard that was a copy of a typical French 19th-century urban plan. We even had a miniature replica of the Eiffel Tower."

"These developments are the same," he said of the American-inspired housing. In Mr. Cruz's view, such projects are a sterile and soulless counterpoint to Tijuana's labyrinthine ghettos, cobbled from the residue of a wealthier echelon.

As Tijuana has expanded into the hilly terrain to the east, squatters have fashioned an elaborate system of retaining walls out of used tires packed with earth. The houses jostling on the incline are constructed out of concrete blocks, sheets of corrugated metal, used garage doors and discarded packing crates — much of it brought down by local contractors and wholesalers from across the border.

Once such a settlement is completed, it is protected from demolition under Mexican law — and the government is eventually obliged to provide plumbing, electricity and roads to serve it. In Mr. Cruz's view, the process is in some ways a far more flexible and democratic form of urban development than is the norm elsewhere.

on local search

Yet he takes a special delight in places where free-spirited forms and conventional ones overlap. One of the strangest sights in Tijuana is a row of vintage California bungalows resting atop a hollow one-story steel frame. Once destined for demolition across the border, they were loaded on trucks and brought south by developers who have sold them to local residents.

To squeeze them into tight lots, many homeowners mount them on frames so they can use the space underneath for shops, car repair and the like. On one site, a pretty pink bungalow straddles a narrow driveway between two existing houses, as if a child were casually stacking toy houses.

Driving further into the hills, we passed through the gates of a sprawling subdivision from the late 1990's that has become its own sort of hybrid. Originally it was conceived as a sprawl of identical beige houses, each no bigger than a two-car garage, arranged behind tidy little lawns in a grim version of the American dream.

Only a few years later, the lawns are now cluttered with car repair shops, grocery stores and taco stands. New floors have been added, single-family homes have been joined together to house extended families, and many of the beige facades have been repainted in bright colors. Mr. Cruz sees the mix as a richer, more vibrant landscape — a spirited answer to the alienation that many of us associate with conventional American suburbs.

It's not that he romanticizes poverty: he recognizes the filth and clutter, the lack of light and air, that were the main targets of Modernism nearly a century ago. But by approaching Tijuana's shantytowns with an open mind, he can extract a viable strategy for development that is rooted in local traditions.

The fruits are visible in Mr. Cruz's peculiar architectural vision. For years now he has been refining a design for a 12-unit housing proposal in San Ysidro, an immigrant community in suburban San Diego, in cooperation with a local advocacy group known as Casa Familiar. The design is conceived as a frame for future development, with a block-long semipublic loggia as its centerpiece.

The loggia will function as a shared communal space for markets, festivals and other social events. Its concrete frame, partly inspired by Donald Judd's sculptural cubes, is intentionally purer and more formal than anything in Tijuana, but that rigorous framework houses an informal and flexible social organism.

A row of delicate wood housing units on top of the frame will heighten the contrast between private and public zones. Each unit is conceived as a series of interlocking rooms that can be broken down into two one-bedroom units or pieced together for large families. And the entire site will be bisected by a semipublic garden that connects West Hall Street to an alleyway that serves as a thoroughfare for immigrants on their way to work.

A second phase calls for parallel rows of housing for the elderly interspersed with semipublic gardens. The single-story blocks are covered by long uniform roofs that tip up at certain points to create space for what Mr. Cruz calls "prodigal apartments" — single units where extended family members can stay. A full-time day care center is also part of the elderly phase, since many immigrant children are being raised by their grandparents.

To proceed with the project, Mr. Cruz opened a full-scale campaign to change San Diego's zoning laws. Working with Casa Familiar, he has sought to open the way for the denser mixed-use communities that are so typical of Mexico — an urban fabric in which structures bleed freely into one another, allowing for the shifting realities of immigrant families. The group's offices will serve as a makeshift city hall, arranging loans and reconfiguring the units.

The San Diego City Council approved the development plan last year, and Mr. Cruz expects

the zoning changes to go through this fall. Planners hope to begin construction next year.

Meanwhile, Mr. Cruz is collaborating with the artist Rebecca Solnit on a theoretical proposal for transforming a 70,000-square-foot McMansion in suburban San Francisco — built during the dot-com boom — into multifamily housing. Mr. Cruz believes that grotesquely oversized houses across the country will eventually go through a similar process, although that time could be 50 years away.

"It's the next ring of densification," Mr. Cruz said confidently of the mega-McMansions, "so we thought it might make a perfect test case. How do you retrofit them?"

More recently, his emergence from the architectural fringes has brought him sexier commissions like a writing studio for the urban critic Mike Davis — the writer calls it his personal shanty — and a winery in Valle de Guadalupe, Mexico. He has also joined with some developers in purchasing a small plot of land in Tijuana's northernmost corner, right against the steel border wall. "It is the absolute corner of Latin America," he said. "We'd love to turn it into a cultural center, maybe with a local university."

In some ways Mr. Cruz's earnestness places his architecture outside the profession, so often myopically obsessed with an aesthetic "wow" factor. But by focusing his attention narrowly on this border area, he has created a mutable template that could be applied far beyond the suburbs of San Diego. For at least a decade now, middle-class immigrants in the United States have been abandoning the city center for the older suburbs at the edges of the metropolis. Mr. Cruz sees these nascent melting pots as a rich laboratory for architectural experimentation.

For the architect, America's traditional "Our Town" model — pitched roofs, front porches, town squares — is no more relevant today than the drearily generic housing blocks of late Modernism. Both visions assume that we are all alike, that we must all subscribe to the same vision of utopia.

What Mr. Cruz is arguing for is freedom — and an openness to the traditions of other cultures. His projects remind us that meaning can be found in places rooted in a personal experience distinct from our own.

How far this spirit will move us depends on how much freedom we are willing to tolerate.

[More Articles in Arts >](#)

[Subscribe to The NY Times Electronic Edition: \\$12.50/8 Weeks](#)

Ads by Google

[what's this?](#)

[Pacific Dentist Tijuana](#)

veneers, dentures, crowns, implants Cosmetic Affordable Dentistry
www.sdco.com/pacdental




[Architecture Jobs](#)

Directory of Architecture Jobs in your area. Campus or Online!
architect.collegeanduniversity.net

[Grimm & Parker Architects](#)

DC area firm seeking design talent Exciting projects, great atmosphere
www.grimmandparker.com

RELATED ARTICLES

-  [The Flying Saucer House Soars Again](#) (March 15, 2001)
-  [DESIGN NOTEBOOK: In Painters' Poetic Homes, the Soul of a Nation Emerged](#) (March 4, 1999)
-  [Footlights](#) (February 4, 1998)
- [Inside Art](#) (October 17, 1997)

RELATED SEARCHES

[Architecture](#) | [Mexico](#)

INSIDE NYTIMES.COM



INTERNATIONAL

[In Spain,
a War of Wine](#)



TRAVEL

[Going to:
Reykjavik](#)



MUSIC

[Miles Davis,
Rock Star?](#)



MEDIA

[Is It an Ad,
or Is It a Sitcom?](#)



ARTS

[Summer Fun at P.S.
1](#)