

TRANS-BORDER:

THREE HOUSES BY LAKE/FLATO
ARCHITECTS

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In his essay "The Overexposed City," Paul Virilio introduces this scientific definition of surface and uses it to make the connection to the transformed nature of the boundary as material or space.¹ The border, whether as an evaporated notion in Europe or as a continuing, contested "in-between" between Mexico and the United States, has been transformed into an osmotic membrane, like a blotting pad. The limitation of space has become commutation: the radical separation, the necessary crossing, the transit of constant activity, the activity of incessant exchanges, the transfer between two environments and two substances. I will argue here that the concept of the border has undergone numerous changes as regards both its materiality — can the border be said to present a façade? — and its space. If a border is still a place, a geographic site delimited as such, it no longer has to do with the classical image of the peripheral boundary as wall or natural geological feature. This image collapsed with the advent of the transportation revolution and the development of communications and telecommunications technologies. It no longer exists in a lineal state, but has become something more akin to a "trans-border" territory.

The Tamaulipas border region between northeastern Mexico and South Texas, the "trans-border" focus for this text, produces a profound uneasiness. The Rio Grande border country that envelops it is both forbidding and indifferent. Concealed beneath an almost continuous, disorienting canopy of mesquite chaparral, inhabited by people rarely seen by the speeding motorist on Interstate 35, traces of a former vitality are almost all that exist. A harsh landscape to begin with, further ruptured by historical and political events, it is an environment disorganized to a point of almost irreversible decay and degradation. The opposite of a marked site wherein the values of a civilization are gathered and condensed, it is a place of "no country." Politics and architecture have largely avoided this "edge." Subsisting in order to separate, it exists in transit, where users of the roads are understood not to be either inhabitants or privileged residents.

What can be said to "belong" to this edge of nothing, this displaced subject? There remain traces of a materiality, of constructed space, now disoriented and dizzy from the speed of events dictated from the outside. Two procedures confront each other when the remnants of this fragmented existence are examined. The first is primarily material, constructed as it is of physical elements, walls, openings, and thresholds, all precisely located. The other is immaterial, images and messages affording neither locale nor stability, since they are the vectors of a momentary expression with all the manipulated meanings and misinformation that presupposes. The first one is architectonic in that it organizes and constructs durable geographical and physical space. The second haphazardly arranges and deranges space-time, the continuum of societies.

EN PAZ Y LIBERTAD OBREMOS { LET'S WORK IN PEACE AND LIBERTY! }

The Fragmented Existence. This inscription carved on the bottom of the central *viga* of a San Ygnacio house summarizes the character of the descendants of Rio Grande pioneers who survived the wilderness.² Many of their dwelling sites are now covered by the waters of Falcón Reservoir and exist only in memory. The initiation of a plan of colonial settlements, the nature of life within the settlements, and the adjustments made to satisfy the demands of a severe environment are reflected in their architecture.

Faced with uncertainties of flood, fire, starvation, and death, the clear image of an unchanging visual environment provided stability for those who lived in relation to its hazards. Long associations with the landscape maintained a sense of continuity through generations of life and extended character through a culture.³

Creating New Fictions.⁴ Onto these fragmented, dispersed existences, in both the material and immaterial sense, are grafted traces of nonexistence, new fictions, if you will, to focus that memory into a clearer image, to serve the purpose of maintaining the essence of that character and extending those qualities forged during a 200-year period. The three ranch houses reviewed here, all designed by San Antonio architects Ted Flato and David Lake and located in the border country of the lower Rio Grande between Roma and Laredo, participate to varying degrees in reestablishing some degree of dimensionality and materiality to this trans-border region, almost dematerialized by the impact of population shifts and new technology. As houses in dialogue with both sides of the border, they adopt a strategy of "mediation through materials,"⁵ like the "osmotic membrane" referred to earlier. Constructed space, then, is more than simply the concrete and material substance of constructed structures, the permanence of elements, and the architectonics of details. It is an instrument of measure, a sum total of knowledge that, contending with the natural environment, becomes capable of recapturing and organizing society's time and space.

"EACH SURFACE IS
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TWO SUBSTANCES
PLACED IN
CONTACT WITH
ONE ANOTHER."

PAUL VIRILIO



Ruins of dry-stacked stone construction,
Vallecillo, Nuevo León.



Ford, Powell & Carson, architects (O'Neil Ford,
David Lake, and Ted Flato), Killam House, Vallecillo
Hunting Lodge, Webb County, 1983.

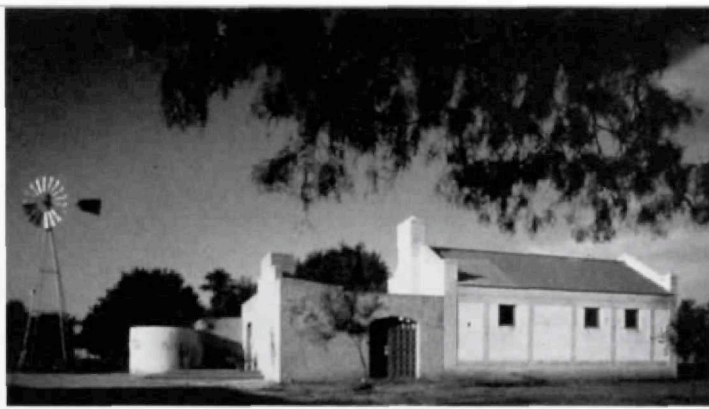
THE HOUSES

VALLECILLO HUNTING LODGE WEBB COUNTY, 1983

Historically, stone has been a primary material in this region, and the quality of the stone masonry encountered indicates that masonry technique was well understood from the time of the first settlement. Wall stones were roughly trimmed quarry blocks, with outer faces trued to alignment. Stone walls were bonded with adobe mud or lime mortar. Often inserted into the joints were small horizontal stones, sometimes forming an overall pattern.⁶

O'Neil Ford, with whom Lake and Flato were working when they designed this house located just north of Laredo, had previously designed two houses for the same client using stone from Vallecillo, Nuevo León. According to Flato, after he had traveled to see Ford's houses, however, the masonry technique looked all wrong — "too slick. You just had to look at those [Vallecillo] houses to figure out how to lay the rock." Vallecillo is a largely abandoned mining village between Laredo and Monterrey built of one-room stone houses.

The material, technique, and plans of Vallecillo were, then, the fragmented existence from which the new fiction of the Killam House was realized. The lodge's layout — a ranch compound composed of freestanding rooms — is like the cluster of stone houses in Vallecillo. The stepped profile of the master bedroom wing romantically recollects



Lake/Flato Architects, Funk House, La Estrella Ranch, Starr County, 1989, exterior.

one Vallecillo house almost literally. The dry-stacked stone structures stand resolute in defiance of the dust stirred up by the continuous convoys of trucks plowing through Laredo on their way to Monterrey.

BARRONENA RANCH HOUSE DUVAL COUNTY, 1985

Ambrosio de Letinez, a fictitious hero created before 1838, accurately described the typical architectural characteristics of northern Mexico:

The style of building is the Morisco throughout [northern] Mexico; that is to say, the houses are almost universally one story high, only, with flat terrace roofs and few windows to the street. They are frequently built in the form of a quadrangle, round a small courtyard.⁷

Often the hut, known as the *jacal*, was constructed of a fence of closely spaced vertical pickets placed into a continuous trench in the ground defining a single room. The fence would serve as a wooden base on whose inner and outer surfaces adobe plaster would be spread.

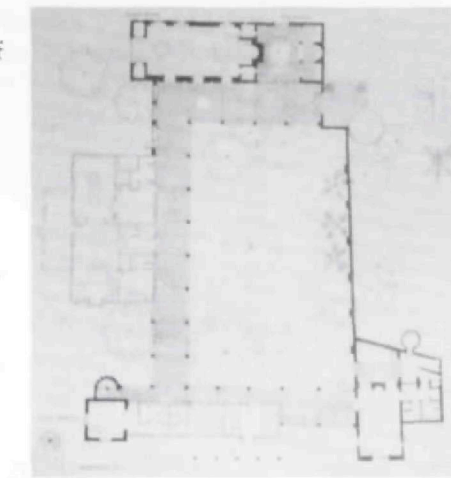
The thick, stucco-clad, 2" x 6" wood-stud walls of the Lasater House, just north of Hebbronville off Highway 16, allow doors and windows to be recessed, so that the walls appear massive and impart a sense of refuge from the area's violent heat, much as a *jacal* would. A simple building, its scale and sculptural form derive from breaking up the house into volumes – "cabins" – that, unlike the *jacales*, are all joined under one roof. This results in two bedroom wings covered by low-sloped metal roofs, leading to a central, high-ceilinged kitchen and living space capped by a

more steeply sloped pyramidal metal roof with a tall windowed cupola. The boundaries between these "cabins" and the outside are blurred with Mexican-style brick-paved, wide screened porches and breezeways that take advantage of prevailing breezes afforded by siting the house on a rise.

More humble than the Vallecillo Lodge and reflecting a radically different materiality, the Lasater House nonetheless manages to focus the memory of the *jacal* and extend its qualities into the tough South Texas landscape.

LA ESTRELLA RANCH HOUSE STARR COUNTY, 1989

Most structures located in the Falcón Reservoir Basin were placed at random on a site and not joined together to form a court, nor were they surrounded by high defensive walls.⁸ The Funk House and Ranch Headquarters incorporates two existing restored buildings, several prized mesquite trees, a water tank, and a windmill into a new, tightly knit fictional compound that ensnares the existing fragments.



Funk House, plan.

Located northeast of Roma, 30 miles from the Rio Grande, the new buildings (a guest room with an observation deck; a master bedroom with a private courtyard and an outdoor shower; a family room; and a barbecue) were connected to these existing structures

by a porch, which forms a breezeway cooling the buildings. A new wall incorporates the windmill and water tank, delineating a courtyard. The new buildings incorporate details from buildings designed by German immigrant architect Heinrich Portscheller in Roma and Rio Grande City in the 1880s and 1890s.

The guest house exterior was designed after the historic La Borde House Hotel in Rio Grande City; a small tower connects with the sky and anchors the structure to the Rio Grande Valley that spreads out below. The owner requested "that the finished product appear old," so walls were constructed of Mexican brick painted with whitewash and powdered pigment, the roof of corrugated metal, and the floors of 4" x 8" pavers and tile from Mexico.

Mesquite has often been used as a construction material in the region. It is durable when properly seasoned. Though its figure and grain are a delight, it is very hard to work because of its tough, irregular grain. Here, long-cut mesquite floors were laid from trees cut at the ranch and seasoned there for a year prior to installation. Mesquite doors and furniture were manufactured in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico, where carpentry and joinery techniques used before 1850 are still practiced and where the standard of craftsmanship is high. Knowledge of the woodworking skills of the lower Rio Grande is only beginning to be discovered.

Certainly the most complexly interwoven new fiction of any of the three ranches discussed here, the Funk Residence benefits by having had more existing fragments to work with. There is no sense of a master plan. Instead, David Lake opted for more informal groupings of separate volumes, usually one room deep to ensure optimal cross ventilation. Expansion of original one-room units in this region has historically occurred by adding a similar room in alignment lengthwise with the original unit. This tends to fragment the experiences of these houses further, leaving the boundaries of existing fragments and new fiction blurred into a dense intertextuality.

Discussions of Lake/Flato's houses revolve around expressions of the physical over the metaphysical. As retreats and ranch houses – weekend escapes – they do not attempt to represent the status of contemporary architecture within the disconcerting discourse of advanced technologies. They begin with an urge to escape from an oppressive technological environment, to regain one's senses and sense of self. While spatial escape may be possible, temporal escape is not. These works of Lake/Flato embrace the aesthetics of the appearance of the stable image sought by Texas pioneers some 200 years before.

This architecture continues to measure itself according to geology, according to the tectonics of natural reliefs, with stone and stucco and brick, in opposition to architecture that measures itself according to state-of-the-art technologies. The technical culture that has conspired to create the trans-border – the connecting grids of highway, service systems, and mass communication systems – are in these houses ignored in order to reconnect with the material substance and the cultural environment of the Tamaulipas border region. It may be that as images whose duration is purely retinal proliferate and continue to breach the material and dematerialize it, "as cyberspace becomes more real," in the words of Michael Benedikt, "the need for real architecture becomes more critical."⁹ ■

1 Paul Virilio, *The Lost Dimension* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1991), p. 17.

2 Eugene George, *Historic Architecture of Texas – The Falcón Reservoir* (Austin: Texas Historical Commission, 1975), p. 1.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 2.

4 Gevork Hartoonian presented the framework for this strategy for the border during a "Dis-Position" discussion titled "Architecture and the Border" on 23 January 1993 at Laredo Junior College.

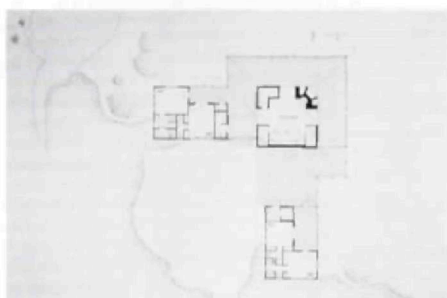
5 Livio Dimitriu introduced this term in opposition to "operating through the wire" as another strategy for the border at the conference in Laredo.

6 George, *Historic Architecture*, p. 34.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 28.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 34.

9 Quoted from a lecture given by Michael Benedikt for his course, "Cyberspace and the Architecture of Virtual Realities," University of Texas at Austin, spring 1992.



Lake/Flato Architects, Lasater House, Barronena Ranch, Duval County, 1985, plan.



Lasater House, exterior.



Lasater House, interior.