Landmark for Justice | Thesis Reflection
a binational courthouse

Border between El Paso and Ciudad Juarez (own ill.)

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The relationship between research and design.
The design of the Binational Courthouse was informed by the extensive research done within the border studio, researching the US-Mexican border. The research can be divided in three phases and corresponding scales. From the scale of the whole border region, through the scales of the different twin-cities along the border down to the scale of the neighbourhood of the specific sites. The first part of the research, on the scale of the whole border, was done as a group. For the second phase, the city scale, we made smaller groups based on the chosen sites for the individual designs. And the final phase of the research was done individual. In the second phase we researched the twin-city El Paso/Ciudad Juarez as it is one of the biggest twin-cities along the border and clearly a place with huge potential. For the Chamizal area, a huge undeveloped site in the centre of El Paso/Ciudad Juarez and basically on the border, we’ve developed a masterplan where a number of different graduate projects are located.

As a group we concluded that the border region has a lot of potential but that this potential isn’t being utilised to its fullest. There is a paradox in the superimposed border as it both attracts and divides. The border region has to overcome the border itself because the border obstructs its proper functioning.

To overcome the physical division by the border and, maybe even more important the psychological border, the bad connotation and perception that comes with the border, we proposed to establish the Transborder Federation. This organisation is aimed to unite the border region and utilise the full potential of the cooperation between the USA and Mexico. The Binational Courthouse is a key component of this aspiration as it responds to the mutual civil and criminal issues related to the border.

In a broader sense the Binational Courthouse is a landmark for justice and a boundary marker at the same time. The building highlights the fact that the border brings two countries together. Not only in a physical sense, but also, in this case, a judicial cooperation. The building expresses, through the different sized blocks, materials and functions, the differences that can be found on both sides of the border and brings them together as one.
Binational Courthouse section (own ill.)
The relationship between the theme of the graduation lab and the subject/case study chosen by the student within this framework (location/object).

The theme of the graduation lab is the Architecture of Violence as described by Chomsky (2013) and deals with the US-Mexican border and the land on both sides of this border. The realisation of the border as we know it nowadays is due to the history of violence concerning the region. From the war in the 1840s to the militarisation of the border in the 2000s under the guise of defence from terrorism, it has impacted the daily life of the people living in the border region. Because of wars and agreements the USA kept on gaining land from Mexico and that is the main reason why there are so many people from Mexican origin living in the southern parts of the USA.

Despite the recent fortification of the border, it still, and always will, attract criminal activities due to the fact of the big differences between the two countries. The border seems to have a far greater effect on the daily life of normal people living in its surroundings than that it will ever have on stopping crime and/or illegal immigration. Besides the terrorism, there are always people wanting to cross the border in search of a better life. This in its turn brings along the criminal activity of human smuggling and then there is also the drug-related crime. Instead of just being the place of all this violence, the border can also be the place where is dealt with these problems and the Binational Court is an architectural intervention in order to do so.

The Binational Courthouse is a place to seek asylum and it’s the place where some of the biggest binational criminals will get prosecuted. It will, like the International Criminal Court in The Hague, have jurisdiction to prosecute criminals and will complement the existing national judicial systems.

Mexican origin population by county in % and the border across the years (own ill.)
The relationship between the methodical line of approach of the graduation lab and the method chosen by the student in this framework.

The idea behind the approach of the graduation lab is to research a broad subject after which each student will find its own subject within the scope of the group work. All the extensive research of the first half year of the graduation lab was combined into a Border Atlas and besides that we gained a lot of inspiration from our trip. On this trip we visited a lot of places along the US-Mexican border to experience it and to give our research a social character.

For the Border Atlas we divided the border region into five parts which we then divided into three topics: Landscape, Social and Typology. This subdivision was used to map the whole border region in the same, comparable, manner.

We identified a number of twin-cities along the border that were interesting enough to zoom into. These cities were analysed in the same manner as the region, thus generating an atlas we could use for developing our individual projects.

For me it was important to choose a subject that I could link back across all the scales of research. The Binational Court does not only changes the site literally, it also has an impact on a broader scale since it addresses the mutual issues of the USA and Mexico due to the existence of the border. Even more it sets an example of how countries can work together, even when the nature of the issues has to do with the difference between the countries.

The relationship between the project and the wider social context.

The US-Mexican border is a border that is part of a global series of borders that separate the functioning core, the wealthier part of the world, from the non-integrating gap. Multinationals seek cheap labour in the non-integrating gap and immigrants seek ‘the American dream’ in the functioning core. In the year 2014 alone there were almost 60.000 unaccompanied children apprehended by the US Border Patrol, this is the biggest number in years. Roughly 3/4 of this number isn’t of Mexican origin and needs to appear in immigration court. Before they can go to court they will have to wait in an immigration shelter, where each individual will stay an average of 35 days. The Binational Courthouse is a reaction to the existing situation of the US-Mexican border but the issue of immigration is actually a global problem. The courthouse could be an example on how to respond and cooperate on this topic of immigration.

Masterplan for the Chamizal zone in El Paso/Ciudad Juarez (own ill.)

Literature