
PREFACE

ENTRE AUTOPISTA Y PUENTE

A BRASS PLAQUE MOUNTED ON THE U.S.-Mexico Gateway to the Americas International Bridge in Laredo, Texas, animated our childhood jaunts to Mexico, or, as we called it, *el otro lado* (the other side).¹ When my siblings and I walked past its embossed words, marking the exact border line, we would nonchalantly switch from speaking English to Spanish. As masters of “Spanglish,” we could do this in midsentence without skipping a beat. Though geopolitical exactness triggered this mocking behavior, we knew many regarded the bridge as a symbol. Each year, this imagined nexus served as a backdrop for national pageantry when officials from the two border cities met there during the George Washington’s Birthday festivities, which Laredoans have celebrated since the 1890s.² This annual reception of officials evolved into a performance called *El Abrazo* (The Embrace), with two pairs of children appearing in national costumes. For many, this performance, and those that came before it, belied the fact that some Laredoans felt they occupied a separate zone in between these two nations, and still others felt that one larger border culture straddled the border itself, existing on both sides.³ The embraces that most often took place on the bridge were familial rather than diplomatic. Following the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo of 1848, many Tejano families were divided, with some deciding to settle in the adjoining town of Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas, choosing Mexican citizenship over remaining in the newly established United States (Figs. P.1 and P.2).

In 1974, when the Pan-American Highway was up-



Fig. P.1. *The Abrazo children negotiating binational relations.*
(Courtesy of Elaine A. Peña)

Fig. P.2. *The Abrazo children representing Mexico and the United States with costumes and flags.* (Courtesy of the Washington’s Birthday Celebration Association)



graded in the form of Interstate 57 to connect the nations at a new point east of the old bridge, resulting in the new Juárez-Lincoln International Bridge, many worried that the Abrazo ritual would be threatened if Laredo's city center also shifted eastward. This highway extension proceeded to destroy one of the city's oldest neighborhoods. We saw history being erased before our eyes. I experienced this firsthand when I assisted in my sister's photojournalism mission that year as she documented the houses that would soon be razed. Laredoans also worried about the potentially waning significance of the old bridge, which had long been such an important part of their everyday life. It was the umbilical cord that connected Laredo's and Nuevo Laredo's city centers. The bridge also led to an unusual streetscape

Fig. P.3. U.S. Congressman Henry Cuellar meets with participants of the Washington's Birthday celebration in Washington, D.C., in full costume, September 2009. Visitors included the Abrazo children and locals depicting George and Martha Washington and Princess Pocahontas and Howling Wolf, Chief of Mystic Skies. (Courtesy of the Washington's Birthday Celebration Association)

on the U.S. side, with street names that reflected our borderland culture and, interestingly, some of my own family's ancestors. We are descendants of the founder of the George Washington's Birthday (GWB) celebration, Mayor Samuel Matthias Jarvis, who had left his imprint on this unique streetscape.⁴ Jarvis, a New York engineer, had raised a Mexican American family in Laredo with his wife, Inocencia Flores, and decided, when he became the city surveyor, to inscribe his own

bicultural reality onto the local streets, renaming them after Mexican and U.S. political and military heroes, local figures, and his own daughters. These cultural constructions were further enriched by additional celebratory events, which continue today. In one such event, a symbolic historical account is performed in conjunction with El Abrazo. High-school-aged participants representing Pocahontas and her court of Indians, astride horses and on foot, lead a parade of extravagant floats carrying thirteen debutantes, who, in turn, portray U.S. colonial figures of note (Fig. P.3).⁵

Cultural engagements of another order helped Laredoans place this unique border life, with its nationally framed performances of ethnicity, in perspective. Local organizations and clubs introduced the concept of Pan-Americanism long before the highway came. These included the Pan American Round Table, introduced in Laredo in 1921 after it was founded in nearby San Antonio in 1916, and the Pan American Student Forums, the popular junior-high and high-school clubs established in Texas in 1943.⁶ Both groups followed the initiatives of the Pan-American Society, which was founded in 1912 by U.S. diplomat John Barrett when he was serving as the Pan-American Union's first director-general. The groups presented forums in which cultural identity was explored in relation to an imagined unified America and not as a product of divisive nationalist constructions. In Laredo, however, a different set of experiences stemmed from a predominantly Mexican American population, which had exceeded 95 percent since 1848. The Pan American Round Table in San Antonio, for example, was composed mostly of Anglo-American members. Florence Terry Griswold founded the club after she opened her home to refugees from the Mexican Revolution. The roundtable's mission of "concern for the welfare of Latins within our borders" has remained one of its main goals.⁷ This group later expanded to Mexico City and Costa Rica, and eventually formed an Alliance of Pan American Round Tables. Across the United States, these and similar organizations, which were quite popular and successful for several decades, chiefly functioned to introduce Anglos to the Latin cultures and the Spanish language.

Despite a growing acceptance of these types of Pan-American activities through the 1960s and 1970s, many locals remained skeptical about the purported benefits offered by the Pan-American Highway, especially given the destruction it brought with its bulldozers and asphalt. Who would most benefit from this slithering plumed serpent? Laredoans wondered. This state of uncertainty only intensified as the highway's connection to the Pan-American Union was better understood: The organization's massive effort to link the Western Hemisphere's northernmost and southernmost points divulged the extent of its heady ambitions. Laredo's liminal existence between this freeway and the old bridge—*entre autopista y puente*—presented an alternative framework within which to consider this undertaking. Through these observations, my interest in the politics of national and cultural formations and negotiations in the built environment was piqued. Locals recognized the grandiosity of the highway's mission to link all the nations of the Americas and evoke the same symbolism at each border crossing along the way. But Laredo was not just one point in this larger network of unity. It was an exceptional crossing, as it represented the United States' link to all of Latin America. Given the mission the highway represented, it was ironic that it required so much historical destruction and apparent disregard for local cultural manifestations. As an aspiring architect, I was left with a yearning to see a more appropriate resolution unfold at this symbolically loaded intersection. The twelve-lane border station that was constructed simply did not fulfill the Pan-American mission.

I begin this history of Pan-American architecture with a description of my own binational cultural landscape because it explains how Pan-Americanism affected my daily life, and it gives a glimpse of a borderland condition that, as I propose in this book, is an important part of Pan-Americanism's built legacy. It also shows how, since the late nineteenth century, generations of U.S. Americans have explored diverse ways of defining Pan-America's spatial dimensions with built works, landmarks, and place-names.⁸ Between Laredo's public rituals, the city's street names, and the 1970s

freeway, this border town engaged contrasting representations of the Americas. But one need only traverse the borderland states to see that representations of Pan-Americana, which today are often linked to Latino communities, are abundant and ubiquitous. Furthermore, Anglo-American attempts to frame a Mexican heritage are often indistinguishable from Mexican American attempts to do the same. These cross-cultural mimetic practices are as complicated as those found in Laredo, where Mexican Americans historically portrayed Martha and George Washington in “white face” during the Abrazo ritual.

My attempt to unravel this ambiguous landscape has led me to study U.S. architectural representations in East Los Angeles and Tijuana, Baja California, and in my graduate thesis on *Sunset* magazine, the promotion of the ranch house building type.⁹ I now turn to a significantly different body of work with the Pan-American Union Building in Washington, D.C., because of its central role in shaping the U.S. interpretation of the Pan-American concept. The study benefited from my familiarity with the work of the two architects associated

with this organization, Paul Philippe Cret and Albert Kelsey. Having spent my formative years as a student of architecture at the University of Texas at Austin, I had developed a fondness for Cret’s work, especially the university’s landmark tower and its architecture building. Kelsey had designed one of my favorite structures in Austin, located right across from the School of Architecture, the Spanish Colonial revival-style University Baptist Church. I never imagined that my research would someday link these two structures with my interest in Pan-Americanism and the built environment. Although the Pan-American Union played an important role in defining the Pan-American concept, the alternative forms of Pan-America examined in this book will also broaden the U.S.-centric hemispheric perspective. I can only imagine that a Pan-America built for and by U.S. Latinos will have an increasing impact on the way Pan-Americanism continues to be interpreted in the United States.

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