



Checkpoint urbanism: Violent infrastructures and border stigmas in the Juárez border region

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Violent infrastructures and structural stigma in the Juárez border region:

Framing a checkpoint urbanism

Abstract

As Popitz argues, violence is one component of the great economy of world history, an option permanently open to human activity (2017). In Ciudad Juárez, right at the border between the United States and Mexico, this notion explains the fundamental incongruity that characterises the region: a booming industrial productive model operating in parallel with an international crime and violence hotspot that is also a coveted criminal passageway. This paper will argue that official and criminal checkpoints designed for border-crossing, have had a transformative spatial role when considered across the dimensions of infrastructure and stigma, triggering a material/symbolic tension. We argue that their location and accessibility determine the exposure of nearby communities to economic growth but also violent entrepreneurship –the illegal crossing of goods and people still remains a constant characteristic of the region, not only as part of a criminal enterprise but as a viable livelihood.

The ways in which the region of Juárez develops and grows also determines how trafficking and illegal practices are established; rules and regulations that provide territorial parameters for what is open and transparent are equally referential to what is clandestine and devious. The tensions brought by the border's geopolitical value have

amplified the value of infrastructure and its practical ownership. The international border operates as a line that is barrier, social divider, landmark, policy-bridge, filtering mechanism, and trafficking obstacle. Under this permanent state of tension, the checkpoints provide a physical structure to the transit flows and a sovereign interruption. Across this *urbanism*, the checkpoint surroundings acquire a magnetic significance, due to the resulting transit dynamics and the surveillance deterrents at the core of their function. Furthermore, their dual nature –official and criminal– has branded the region as a criminal outpost, stigmatising the people inhabiting it, and perpetuating the idea that Juárez is defined by its violent infrastructures.

Keywords

Border wall, Ciudad Juárez, urban violence, urban stigma, infrastructures

Introduction

The Chihuahua Desert, the largest in North America, lies at the central section of the United States-Mexico border, a mostly barren wilderness with thousands of square miles of dirt and dust flanked by massive sierras. Ciudad Juárez is at the centre of this desert, which occupies regions in three north Mexican states as well as parts of Arizona, New Mexico and Texas. The region of Juárez is a territory simultaneously defined by its mobility (of migrants, of goods, of trafficking) and by the fixity and deterrence of the

international border with the United States, its implacable determinant. The conflation of policies, planning, social tensions and crime have certainly been instrumental in producing a series of conditions where violence has proliferated, in various forms, over decades. Equally important, though, has been the unique environment that surrounds and defines the urban form of the city and its extensions. Just as the riverbed of the Rio Grande/Bravo has allowed for a rich agricultural tradition (cotton and nut tree plantations mostly), the forms and positioning of hills, dunes and mountains have shifted from natural scenery into strategic vantage points.

Along a history of violence, spatial arrangements have been determinant in shaping the characteristics ascribed to Juarez —both from the existing territorial conditions and the planned infrastructure development distinctive of an international border city. The growth in power of organized crime has provoked a rearrangement of territorial practices on the Mexican side, which has been matched (and probably superseded) by a growing security border apparatus, embracing its own reactionary use of space. Ciudad Juarez's historical traits —violence, production, mobility— have had a twofold territorial effect: spatially, the shaping of the city as a function of checkpoint dynamics; and in terms of identity, the development of a character construct that has made and stigmatised the city as a symbol of extreme violence.

There are three international checkpoints between Ciudad Juarez and El Paso; in conjunction, they are the world's largest international border metroplex (EPTX 2020).

Three additional checkpoints operate outside city limits, built in recent years to ease the growing volume of products moving from maquilas in Mexico to the United States.

These checkpoints are large scale binational infrastructure complexes that include passageways, control points, bridges, security stations and several other layers of securitisation and filtering. On both sides of the border, these spaces are managed and serviced by border police, immigration branches, and special operations units that are tasked with the daily challenges of border crossings. However, the violence stemming from Ciudad Juarez and its surrounding areas have expanded the role of checkpoint security into a longitudinal framework of technological deterrence, surveillance and capture.

The current binational checkpoint apparatus is partly a legacy of the Obama era, which developed together with the Mexican Government the “Building A 21st Century Immigration System” charter (White House 2011). In the decade since, this system has broadened the investment in checkpoints and the fencing infrastructure that connects them, consolidating their nature as hubs of transit and detention, operating against the perceived threat of violence and illegal immigration through an extremely violent system of its own. The El Paso-Ciudad Juarez border area is partitioned by carefully designed violent infrastructures that have shaped how the city functions, how citizens behave and how the endemic violence has adapted. Furthermore, these accumulated factors have shaped the region’s character: an intersection between a legacy of casualties, criminal threats, and the resultant stigmas that have been ascribed in space.

This paper understands that the definition of the checkpoint, and its territorial effects transcend their physical nature and objectives. As Tawil-Souri (2011) suggests, checkpoints in contested border areas often extend beyond the infrastructural and the physical, and impose meaning outside of their footprint: simultaneously a “unique anthropological space and nondescript nonspace” (p.5) and “diverse in their material formations, placement, and function” (p.6). This duality manifests in the case of Ciudad Juarez, a territory that has been incorporated into what Rijke and Minca (2019) define as a Checkpoint Regime, “geographical formations capable of implementing specific strategies of control and limitation on the mobility of people and things” (p.972). Furthermore, we find that this broader regime of influence not only extends the limits of territorial influence but also the urban order (an urbanism) and the policies that react to it. It is essential to understand what the checkpoint is and also what the checkpoint does; in this case, a collection of buffer areas in land and space that extend miles beyond the administrative border, assigning spatial and social identifiers, signals and codes. This checkpoint urbanism, thus, encompasses the production of a securitised backbone that anchors a set of behaviours, violent events and mobilities that follow a checkpoint logic –not the official, protocol-ridden one, but a system that is brokered with respect to the border’s fragmentation and a history of violence.

The following sections will discuss the unique distortion of an urban model (that of a border city) suffocated by an exceptional threat of violence and organised crime. In this

case, the determinants of crossing that define a border city's identity have escaped the domain of strict sovereignty conditions or outright binational conflict. The checkpoint urbanism that has developed in Ciudad Juárez shows the intromission of powerful criminal actors into how the border is crossed, disputed and reframed. The city contains a network of parallel territorial arrangements resulting from a growth model closely aligned to trade, which has materialised into official transit hubs surrounded by widespread criminal activities, also in need of their own crossing points. The intersection between border-based capitals and exceptional violence implies a spatial shift where the identity of the city gradually adjusts: first, a perception against the city and the dwellers as part of an ultra-violent environment and, second, the stigmatisation of spaces themselves. Streets, parks and post codes act, become organised as part of a violent order, the transitional boundaries of micro-sovereign strongholds where a branded type of spatial violence is either performed or attempted.

Spatialising the Checkpoint Dispositive

The relationship between the checkpoint, borders and asymmetric security apparatus has a broad literature, with paradigmatic cases such as Israel's radical militarisation of Palestinian lands (see, among others, Hammami 2010, 2015; Kotef and Amir 2007, 2015; Rijke and Minca 2018); Europe's biopolitical response to refugee arrivals (Aradau and Tazzioli 2020, Vaughan-Williams 2015; Fishel and Wilcox 2017; Sigona

2017); and the Mexico-United States history of border policing (Andreas 2011; Castañeda and Melo 2019; Boyce and Chambers 2021). These authors have aligned with a broader interpretation of what checkpoints signify and how their operational logic warps urban and social traits. In the case of Ciudad Juarez these characteristics can shape perceptions of place and identity. Boyce and Chambers (2021), for example, describe how the development of tactical border infrastructure transforms the geography of unauthorized migration routes, leading to state violence through the fabric of the built environment. They label the spatial result as a “corral apparatus” that acts as a territorial mechanism of adaptive confinement, meant to deter and arrest. Technology at the service of preemptive stigmatization is not exclusive of space dynamics either. Castañeda and Melo (2019) argue that the spatial violence created by checkpoints can lead to a reformulation of citizenship.

It is precisely this spatial violence what permeates the checkpoint urbanism across the Juarez region, a constant and multifaceted force that has, historically, suffocated the city’s growth patterns and branded it as an infamous case of exceptional bloodshed. This symbolic power is akin to what Wacquant (2007; 2010) labels as territorial stigmatization or tainting, whereby a place becomes a topography of disrepute. In Ciudad Juarez, its metropolitan taint stems from a convoluted history of *narco* cartel activities, police corruption, the infamous rise of femicides, and undocumented migrants against a backdrop of expanding manufacturing spaces. These factories or maquilas (systematically violent in their own right) are also part of the city’s ‘structural stigma’

which following Bos, Pryor, Reeder, and Stutterheim (2013) results from an institutional and ideological legitimization of Ciudad Juarez as a paragon of peril and dangerous people.

This paper analyses the intersection of violence and stigmatisation at the urban scale based on participant observation derived from a broader research carried out in Ciudad Juárez between 2017-18¹. This is complemented by a review of existing empirical research and morphological studies on the history of Juarez urban evolution; reviewing literature on various aspects of the its local planning history and political transitions in institutional frameworks and of the state actors involved in key urban policies and plans; utilising official documents and reports on key political decisions, urban plans and development projects; and reading information gathered from newspapers, government archives, statistics, and the Mexican Geographic Institute. The city's history and recent identity demonstrates the correlation between urban growth, violence and measures of security: since the Clinton administration, every United States presidency has appointed millions of dollars to improve, extend and strengthen the border division. This is even more tangible with the infamous 'border wall', which is really a series of barriers with different heights, finishes and purposes that require large-

¹ This larger research included 37 interviews: 26 semi-structured interviews with planning experts and 20 unstructured interviews with a broad variety of stakeholders in Ciudad Juarez and the Valley of Juarez between April 2017 and February 2018. This paper is not focused on analysing this ethnographic data, but benefits from the knowledge derived from this research.

scale landscaping. In the constant contradiction of this region, even major actors have co-opted topography; on one side, a repurposing of natural features to sustain the demands of criminal operations, and on the other, a radical shifting of terrain itself:

One striking aspect of this fence-building is that it has transformed topographical verticality into a pure horizontal. The natural elevations and folds of the landscape are smoothed over and made level. The specificity of the local is literally bulldozed over to make way for the abstract geopolitical space of the international borderline. The effect is to erase history, context, and locality (Nyers, 2012, p.4).

Exceptional measures are a common mechanism on both sides of the border, but their origin differs. It is necessary to highlight that before the Mexican War on Drugs was declared by the government in 2006, the conditions of contestation between government actors (in both countries) against illegal activities had long been established, logistically and financially (Zavala, 2019). However, the recognition of the menace of crime and violence was, and has always been, decided by a constant asymmetry of power that, certainly, culminates in homicides and brutality, but which originated in the United States' sovereign dominance of the territorial strip that divides both nation states.

There is an extensive scholarship explaining the environmental asymmetry along this border (see Cervantes Rendon, 2017a, 2017b; Jepson, 2014; Sprouse, 2005; Buechler,

2009). Through territorial and environmental one-upmanship, the region around Ciudad Juárez has been dependent on the securitisation and ideological methods of United States border policy. This unbalance is similarly evident in the political discourses, media narratives and actions that have stigmatised the north of Mexico as a “lawless” region that allows the invasion of migrants, that is unable to control drug trafficking, and which is the hotbed of extreme violence. The construction of these stigmas often substantiates policy decisions, but it is also a deliberate rhetorical practice: there is scarcely any record of politicians in the United States acknowledging the active culpability that their country has in stimulating, supporting and perpetuating all these phenomena.

Juárez lies at the core of this tension, a city that is simultaneously a gateway, a trade zone, a threat, an industrial hotbed and a political headache. At the geopolitical scale, it is a territory in flux that has taken form through juridical shape-shifting—in international treaties and agreements that have affected the border itself. During the last 100 years, the Mexico-United States border has seen increased securitisation, a process that reflects the complex bilateral relationship between both countries, and which materialises in physical barriers and instruments of stoppage. Locally, these tensions are even more intricate, with areas subjected to control by multiple actors, and where sovereignty is under dispute, often through non-official mechanisms of power: the administrative jurisdictions that define countries, states and local regions clash with

temporal regimes of power (cartels, paramilitary groups); the traditional dividing lines become distorted and their appropriation often occurs outside the rule of law.

In Juárez, the last decades have seen the radicalisation of this process, where historical migration trends have collided with an infrastructure of transnational trade, strained checkpoints and a fierce battle among armed groups to control territories, communities and people. The tension brought by mobility and border demands have illustrated how the lack of legal documents and the focus on stopping unauthorized migrations is ineffective (Cornelius 2001) and mostly a political failure (Andreas 2000), albeit with dire consequences for those crossing unauthorized (Eschbach, Hagan & Rodriguez 1999). Ironically, the U.S.–Mexico border continues to be highly porous, as more than 153.7 million persons enter the U.S. legally through a Southern port of entry yearly (BTS 2012).

When president Calderon called for a military takeover of criminal organisations in 2006 his decision followed the pressures of border dynamics and, juridically, by the norms and regulations that had been set up in post 9-11 United States. Border control had been at the forefront of a series of draconian security measures that had, in effect, sent the United States territory into a state of exception². The fear of uncontrollable

² The entrenchment of this new phase of sovereign exceptionality manifested through territorial hyper-securitisation, concretely with two major congressional approvals: the USA Patriot Act, signed in October 2001, and the creation of the Department of Homeland Security in November 2002.

violence at the Mexican border, together with an erosion of local governance, confirmed to United States authorities the need to strengthen means of surveillance under the guise of protective measures against terrorism. Although there has never been proof that terrorist cells have been established in Mexican territory, the environment of conflict between cartels created enough tension and public rejection that measures of control, even if extreme, were seen as an understandable step that could even help control the murderous aftermath drug trafficking.

Mexican politicians aligned to this idea of restoring 'law and order', and the campaign leading to Calderon's election centred on the strategies needed to 'recover' state control. The breaking point of violence, which was already present, had shifted from being a dangerous social problem into an expected military intervention, upping the stakes of the territorial implications this confrontation could have. It also elevated the power status of cartels and criminal entities, indirectly acknowledging their firepower and a level of parity that was previously unspoken of.

The birth of a border economy

Ciudad Juárez sits at the midpoint along the border line between the United States and Mexico. When it was founded in the early 20th Century, its unique location and integration with El Paso in Texas, eased transit between the two countries in a growing

urban area divided by the Rio Bravo and not much else. With Prohibition, however, the relation between the two sides began to radically change, generating a series of transformations that would determine the contrasting character that has come to define Juárez and El Paso ever since.

Border control measures gradually increased to prevent bootlegging and trafficking in general; what was a natural border became a supervised area with checkpoints and customs infrastructure, and an increased presence of police personnel. In the incipient 1920s, and despite a recent legacy of armed conflict (both between the United States against Mexico as well as internecine civil wars), it was the legal exception over traded goods and the territorial threshold of enforcement what contributed most to build Ciudad Juárez modern identity.

With commonplace draconian measures in the United States, cities like Juárez became hotbeds for alcohol trade and consumption, which in turn spurred tourism, horse and dog racing, bull-fighting and prostitution (Valenzuela Arce, 2012). This sudden growth spurred the creation of hospitality infrastructure, banks, leisure establishments and markets, quickly profiling the city as a destination with opportunities and demand for new labour.

Migratory waves would become integral to Juárez urban functioning, a phenomenon that was usually correlated to events in the United States, building a fragile co-dependency that was in turns exploitative, opportunistic and unsustainable.

Fundamental among these processes was the consolidation of industrial manufacturing, initially as a response to cross-border proximity but which later grew as a reactive, institutionalised mode of development at a much larger transnational scale. This model, however, took decades to develop into an established growth strategy. After the Prohibition era was over, Juárez retained relevance due in part to its proximity to United States military bases during the Second World War (Martinez, 2018). For example, Fort Bliss, in the outskirts of El Paso, had 25 thousand stationed soldiers who often used their off-duty days in the Mexican side, free from the Army's code of conduct (García Alarcón, 2014).

The constant mobilisation across the border solidified the service-based economy that had been established a few years back, but also confirmed the historical liaison between Juárez and El Paso and their close urban functions in relation to the other: an articulation equally vital in terms of culture, trade, identity and, significantly, space. In times of war and upheaval, border towns like Juárez offered an inflexion point –not only as social escapes but as valuable territories of outstanding legal exception standing in such short proximity. Figure 1 illustrates the growth of the bi-national urban region in the past century, turning from a small outpost to a transnational metro-area.

Insert Figure 1 here

This growth has historical roots: the most significant legacy of the Second World War in the border region was the implementation of the Bracero Program in 1942, agreed between both governments, in which Mexican labour was requested in the United States to placate the lack of male workers due to enlistment (Thompson, 2017; Bass Zavala, 2013). This migratory measure allowed over five million Mexicans to receive temporary residence in labour areas for over ten years, to work in fields and factories – initially due to war-time production constraints– and later because of the accelerated growth in post-war United States.

The ensuing northbound migration wave represented an influx of new residents to Juárez as well, where some workers settled, spurring the area's most significant rise in population density since its formation. As the town's centre extended to accommodate new residential areas, Juárez and its adjacent territories embraced a full-on process of urbanisation that tested national and local capacities to adapt administratively, culturally and socially, a challenge that would bring sustained growth but also endemic faults that are still visible to this day.

The evolution of a violent landscape

In the brief history of Ciudad Juárez it has been violence, in its multiple forms, what is mostly associated with the area. These violent events, or periods, have gained international notoriety the last three decades in particular: the unique and perverse

pattern of femicides that hit the region –a subject which has been extensively researched, discussed and mapped (see Monarrez, 2009; Herrera 2015; Leal, 2008; Messmer, 2012; Wright, 2011; Gonzalez Rodriguez, 2012); the territorial disputes between quarrelling criminal organisations and the ensuing casualties brought by the illegal trafficking industry (Wright, 2013; Campbell & Hansen, 2014; Grayson, 2010) ; and the military intervention framed as a War on Drugs that generated a spike in murders, one that positioned Juárez as the deadliest place in the world for a period of time (Meyer, Brewer & Cepeda, 2010; Sullivan, 2009).

As much as these events can be explained as the exceptional, anomalous signs of a uniquely fractured urban setting, they represent the culmination of city processes that are not necessarily an exclusive by-product of conflict and chaos, but also the result of territorial policies, administrative decisions and market opportunities. The social punishment brought by violence, specifically at its highest peak during the Calderón administration's War on Drugs (from 2006-2012), did not occur spontaneously or only because of drug trafficking. On the contrary, the unique conditions that positioned Juárez as a geography of devastating conflict lie, in part, in its historical spatial arrangement, its growth patterns and its ineluctable condition as a border zone. This is, of course, probably true to most border cities in the world (Herzog, 1991; Buursink, 2001; Sohn, 2014), but the Juárez region developed under a series of socio-economic characteristics that were truly exceptional measures, a city constructed through erratic

political calculus, enabled as much by its environment, its strategic value and its social capital.

The nature of these measures, however, are varied in their scope, scale and purpose.

While part of Juárez current identity resulted from urban planning and policy-making, informal covenants and territorial fortuity also contributed to forge it—a series of parallel and often overlapping processes, intricately related. Pressured by the multiple forces that come with border trade and social interactions, Juárez made a significant strategic jump, turning from one of several border towns into a landmark industrialised node. This process has encountered an underlying tension of violence, which has acted as a transformative agent not only at the ends of causality, but which has been integral to other existing social and urban tensions.

Foucault suggested that in contemporary liberal governments liberty is linked with security, whereby economic stability needs security to ensure capital prosperity. In neoliberal contexts, these relations are explicit, where “the argument over necessity and the state of exception is a particular variant of this security-liberty relationship insofar as it concerns the quantum of liberty exchanged for securing it” (Dean, 2010:466). In Juárez, Industrialisation overlapped with transnational measures that would also alter how that model was to adapt and develop over time. The sovereign exchange that has come to define the city in terms of population and culture, eventually came to define its

urban identity and, in parallel, the exceptional conditions that allowed for violence's own normalisation.

Juárez's urban morphology in the last century can be divided into four broad periods that show its evolution, from an accessible border town to a heavily securitised transnational region. Additionally, it shows a compressed trajectory of development common to Latin American cities: an agriculturally driven area that starts turning into a service-based economy, which eventually aggregates to the networked demands of a neoliberal market.

The Bottleneck (1917-1942): Two different events shaped Juárez future during 1917. After being an almost free-transit town connected to El Paso, Texas, new checkpoints and security measures were developed in response to both health and military demands. The United States government, claiming a need to control typhus (and associating it with Mexicans), established “a border hygiene regime in 1917, which subjected all persons desiring to enter the United States to medical examinations, disinfections and vaccination” (Fischer, 2013, p. 180). Additionally, the 1917 Selective Service Act, which called for World War I military conscription, generated increased border arrangements during times of war; in the case of Mexicans, the measures aimed to “discourage their stay in the United States and motivate their voluntary return” (Breceda Perez & Nava Gonzalez, 2013, p. 257). This period saw the establishment of the physical border fence between both countries anchored by the construction of one

official international checkpoint as its focus point. The combination of these factors, followed by the Prohibition era, turned Juárez into a bottleneck settlement, a node for migrants who could not get past the border and for United States citizens taking advantage of Mexican legislature.

Bracero Outpost (1942-1964): With the heavy demands brought by World War II, the United States faced significant labour shortages. Even though Mexican labourers had been a steady workforce, their role was mostly seasonal and specific to border farmlands. In 1942, the United States and Mexico signed the Mexican Farm Labor Agreement, informally known as the Bracero Program³, which granted a set number of Mexican citizens temporary residence in United States territory, including a minimum wage and decent standard of living. Although altered by amendments, the programme was a success, in that thousands of Mexican labourers crossed the border legally, with most of the labour settling close to the border (Esparza, Waldorf, & Chavez, 2004, p. 122). The role of the border began changing during this period, as it signalled the wider buffer area that, to this day, shapes the US-Mexico border dynamics, where the static nature of the border walls and their checkpoint stations expanded into a more atomised network. This transborder order, started signalling the urban forms that would consolidate as more and more migrants secured labour access in the United States, as well as those who could not. Despite the Bracero program's success, a large majority of

³ *Bracero* is an informal way of calling a manual labourer, from *brazo*, arm.

migrants were unable to cross, making Mexican border cities hubs for temporary residence that, in many cases, turned permanent. In the Juárez region, this was reflected in a dramatic rise of both population and urban extension, as “the city expanded from 560 hectares to 2,300 hectares, an increase of 310%” (Esparza et al., 2004, p. 128).

Checkpoint City (1964-1994): The Bracero Program ended definitively in 1964, following an increased suspicion about poor immigration controls and the exploitation farmers were making of the programme’s low wage. Although this at once forced thousands of Mexicans to return, it coincided with a period of large governmental investment in border urban development. This articulated into two programmes: the National Border Programme (PRONAF), which was later followed by the Border Industrialisation Programme (BIP). Juárez had an increasing ‘floating’ population in need of work, looking to cross the border in many cases, but also willing to settle in the region. The first investment of PRONAF focused on the creation of large-scale infrastructure, including highways, two new border checkpoint bridges and a new modern urban centre that included cultural buildings and government facilities. The transformation from a monocentric to a duo-centric city strengthened with the BIP, where large-scale industries (maquiladoras) explicitly drove the local economy: “land, productive areas, access to main roads, international bridges, etc. The maquila industry thus became the main economic activity in the city, displacing tertiary ones” (Flores Fuentes, 2001:6). With increasing trade, special trade zones and fast-track custom measures, checkpoints expanded into the economic order itself, creating a subset of

market-oriented spaces where products were checked, authorised and cleared of shipping. In terms of labour, maquilas became control points, where workers had to abide to corporate requirements through proof of identity, often living in satellite housing villages that streamlined the production chains.

Violent Trade Region (1994-present): The consolidation of manufacturing in the region produced a continuous internal migration of workers, mostly from Mexico but also from Central America. In 1994 the National American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) was signed between Canada, the United States and Mexico. By that time, cross-border trade was already commonplace in Juárez, but the new agreement created new commercial conditions that expanded the industrial scope, both in specialisation and in territory. Companies from Taiwan, Germany, the UK and many others settled manufacturing plants in Juárez, receiving help from cheap labour force, lax worker rights and the fast movement of goods into United States territory. Not surprisingly, NAFTA also benefitted another growing trading industry, the one that would finally determine the current territorial arrangements in the region: drug trafficking criminal organisations (Fischer 2013). Cartel violence rose to prominence during this period, leading to a criminal arms race to control the trafficking routes along the border and the checkpoints.

As seen from these periods, three initial considerations become clear: a) the shifts in spatial arrangements in the region were significantly determined by major economic

policies; b) these policies or strategies were a direct reaction to events and measures determined by the United States' sovereign interests; and c) the steady urban growth of the Juárez region has been matched by an equally increasing deployment of border security measures to deter crossings and illegal migration. Thus, we can argue that the recent history of Juárez is as much a reflection of the territorial arrangement of capitals as it is of the infrastructure that has come to determine how this arrangement articulates itself.

Furthermore, urban transformation has been an ongoing process of territorial redistribution between the state, the cartels, investors and local citizens themselves, a process that exposes the repeated failures of the Mexican State and its struggle to claim full control over its administered land. Since the start of the government's War on Drugs in early 2007, the Juarez region has seen a profound transformation of its territory, as described in the following conditions:

- Increased migrations from peri-urban towns towards urbanised neighbourhoods, and across the border to the United States.
- An abandonment of private and public infrastructure, particularly housing stock, affected by the periods of violence.
- A transferral of spatial control, where dominion relates to criminal network controls.

- A fractured legacy of new territorial politics, with ‘no-go’ areas, destitute ‘ghost towns’ and grave environmental damage.

Identity in the binational apparatus

Notwithstanding the dynamism of the industrial economy, where economic impetus brings people and attracts all sorts of investment, physical means restrict Ciudad Juárez. The current border barrier, which has been a constant since at least the early 90s, has been developed as part of a much larger contingent of physical objects with the sole aim to stop movement from South to North, including sewage canals, bridges, highways, and designed empty landscapes that allow for easy monitoring.

The border barrier is not a continuous wall nor is it a recent occurrence from the Trump administration (Miller & Nevins, 2017). The highest period of construction was between 2005 and 2010, when Juárez was at the peak of growth and violence; otherwise, additions have been steadily completing a barrier conceived since the George H.W Bush administration. This fact, although superficially logical, is a reminder of the exceptional circumstances that determine Juárez urban functionality: on one hand, it is a city that receives national and international stimulus to keep growing –because of its strategic location, logistical advantages and endless supply of labour; and on the other, its consistent urban growth has been constructed as a threat to United States sovereignty.

These seemingly contradictory models have received financing from official channels in both countries, in the agreements mentioned in the section above or through several other localised planning decisions, particularly conceived in relation with El Paso. The Juárez region, thus, sits at the threshold between a neoliberal model in constant manufacturing expansion and the most sophisticated politics of prevention and punishment, a liminal space that has proven terribly fragile to the inevitable disturbances brought by this coercive antagonism. As Marchand (2004) explains, Juárez modernisation fits into how the “project of neoliberal disciplining has entailed, and still entails, a profound and violent restructuring of state-society relations” (p.47).

The phases of industrialisation had already determined the region’s morphology, even decades before NAFTA created new conditions of spatial transformation. While the first wave of the PRONAF and BIP packages provided the financial and ideological frameworks for the city’s identity (a low-cost high-volume production hub), technological advances and urban expansion kept refining both product specialisation and the city’s layout. From the early 60s until the early 90s, Juárez population rate remained significant (between 7% and 5% every decade), leaping from 276,995 inhabitants in 1960 to 798,499 in 1990 (Lopez Navarrete & Peña Medina, 2017, p. 119).

The arrival of these thousands of migrants forced a rearrangement of the city’s traditional form; outgrowing the historic downtown, new residential areas consolidated

around manufacturing nodes and, over time, in the peripheries. While some of the housing solutions were integral to the scope considered in the BIP's planning scheme, the governmental capacity to develop the city on par with the arrival of migrants proved insufficient. Aside from housing, Juárez's growth also expanded the local government's size, the scale of official institutions and the infrastructure needed to connect them. As industrialisation consolidated, the region was also established nationally as the main strategic node in the central border strip, materialised through an important economic growth –certainly aided by PRONAF and the BIP, but also supported by an incipient service sector focused on supplying the basic needs for this new population.

Throughout this period, the main areas of transformation were easily identifiable: housing, industrial plants and transportation/mobility infrastructure. These three elements remain at the core of how Juárez has been conceived and planned, articulating in conjunction as the central objectives of every planning decision made in the past five decades. Logically, these three areas transcend their simplistic label; in each case, their impact has been materialised in distinct manners, developed between the rules and regulations established by political measures and the haphazard reactions to them. As with its dichotomous relationship with the border, the planning of Juárez developed from jurisdiction, but also from the tacit assimilation of corruption, informal practices and blatant political malpractice.

The case of housing, for example, exemplifies the pressures that appeared from the sudden population increase. It also reveals that, over time, distinct population groups with different spatial needs and aspirations shaped housing delivery –many times at odds with each other. From the 70s onwards, government sanctioned projects were usually designed, developed and delivered through the Institute for the Workers Housing National Fund (INFONAVIT), focusing on social housing compounds for public officials and worker organisations. Private development evolved in parallel, with new neighbourhoods forming away from downtown and towards the eastern side, focusing mostly in an incipient middle class that was not necessarily employed by the industrial sector. Figure 2 shows the differences between an INFONAVIT development scheme and the rest of city development: material experimentation, layout composition, wider streets and higher vertical density (see Figure 2).

Insert Figure 2 here.

Residents employed by the government and national institutions usually had access to these projects, settling in neighbourhoods that solidified over time as part of Juárez's urban tissue. This workforce included people who had settled in the city long-term, living and working in a compact area with the safety provided by contracts with official institutions and the multiple benefits they offered. In contrast, Juárez also has had a historically mobile population, of residents that work in El Paso and cross the border every single day. Contrary to misplaced beliefs, many Juárez citizens have dual

nationality, and choose to live in Mexico while working in the United States –because their income in dollars gives them a land-acquisition power that is larger south of the border.

This is a fundamentally active workforce that reinforces the binational identity of the region. As is their right, second and third generation workers living in Mexico have enrolled their children in El Paso schools, continuing the cycle of dual nationals that keep territorial roots in Juárez but are fully incorporated into the United States' administrative and juridical systems. This mass transit of people to-and-fro on a daily basis has dictated two important spatial characteristics: pockets in Juárez that have developed more like dormitory neighbourhoods or gated communities; and a massive burden on the border crossings, which in conjunction have Juárez-El Paso among the most transited border areas in the world.

As it is usually the case, at the edges of these production outposts, a series of informal settlements consolidated into highly populated *colonias* with poor services, transient migration and social dynamics around origin, gender and territorial power. Many of these people comprise, to this day, the bulk of factory workers in the city –a fundamental work-force, the one that keeps Juárez in full operation. However, rather than a homogenous mass, their profile is a mixed bag of aspirations, ranging from those who take jobs awaiting to cross the border illegally, to those who find it the only option due to limited education, to those that have it as a second or third job to support their

living. And just as with the social groups and development trends described above, these would all suffer striking turns after violence became entrenched in city life.

Where violence meets capital

1993 proved to be a watershed moment in the history of the region. As described above, it was an inflexion point in Juárez's economic and sovereign status, radically altered by the congressional approval of NAFTA and the surprise enactment of Operation Blockade. Although these measures grabbed most political attention, the insidious growth of violence –particularly against women– took a quantifiable turn, one which would become an indelible indicator of the region's dramatic relation with death. As Julia Monarrez explains, “1993 represents for Ciudad Juárez and the international community a paradigmatic and indelible mark, where women and human rights activist groups, together with feminists, started a register of murders committed against girls and women” (Monarrez & Cervera Gomez, 2013, p. 64).

A wealth of excellent local research has been conducted around issues of gender violence in Juárez (see Monarrez, 2000, 2002, 2005; Fragoso, 2002; Perez & Padilla, 2002; Ravelo Blancas, 2005; Ravelo Blancas & Sanchez Diaz, 2006; Segato, 2013; Cruz Sierra, 2014), and although it is not the focus of the present paper, the scientific acknowledgement of gender-driven violence (in this case through statistical analysis) was a fundamental step in observing the vicious effects that a political and economic

model could normalise within its urban function. In a deeply patriarchal country, where violence against women is still commonplace and, in many cases, socially accepted, specifying a root or cause is a simplistic exercise. Juárez is not necessarily an outlier in bulk indicators, because murders and attacks on women have been and remain a constant feature of social behaviour in Juárez, in Mexico and across the globe.

The focus on feminicides⁴ is one of several manifestations of violence in the region. By any relevant indicator, the peak of violence in Juárez took place between 2010-2011. For five years, the murder rate had grown to unseemly levels, the highest in the country and, for a considerable time, in the world (Valencia & Chacon 2011; Arseneault 2011). At the regional level, despite states of siege, military patrolling, curfews and a latent state of war, the entrenchment of a systemic cycle of violence had become a statistical reality with no clear reversal. Ciudad Juárez experienced extraordinary events of carnage, with civilians gradually becoming common victims; this was an expansion of the traditional radius of violence, which had previously remained a conflict between official forces and cartel members. The rupture of this boundary meant that the codification of violence had shifted; while politically speaking the war was described as

⁴ There is a relevant epistemological distinction between the use of *feminicide* and *femicide*. Scholars in Juárez have adopted the former, claiming it is the proper semantic construction for the local context. For a wider debate see the arguments by Jill Radford and Diana Russell (1992), who created the original definition of *femicide* (killing of women by men for being women); and Lagarde (2010), who adapted the definition into *feminicide*, which is gender-based violence characterized by the inaction of the state.

a targeted affair, the spatial reality was an all-out conflict where gang members, policemen, soldiers, but also teenagers, addicts and civilians of all nature were exposed to death at any time.

The stigmatisation of Ciudad Juárez was representative of this period, acquiring an international symbolism about the state of failure produced by Calderón's presidential choices. Urban conflicts capture collective imagination because cities hold an infrastructural language that can be relatable, referenced and rationalised. The spectacle of death, which was exploited daily by the media and by political interests across all ideological spectrums, became serialised with macabre efficiency: imagery of decapitations; bodies hanging from bridges; built environment imprinted with the damage of heavy artillery; improvised gated streets with makeshift barricades trying to hold, in utmost desperation, a semblance of protection. Public outcry, even outside Mexico's borders, was unanimous in its condemnation (The Guardian, 2009; Reuters, 2010), and soon enough the city became a recognisable paradigm –its associations to death exploited by journalism, media and the film industry (Dominguez Rubalcaba, 2010; Koram, 2017).

Despite this serious urban fracture, the city's indisputable importance as a trade anchor and a global manufacturing hub brought very specific types of support, most of them attempting to correct its negative perception. The national government, with significant

support via The Merida Initiative⁵ by the United States, started pouring extraordinary funds to revert the notion of Ciudad Juárez as a lost territory, creating the Todos Somos Juárez programme to build a series of projects in conjunction with local authorities and civil society groups. Although the programme's success is questionable, it showed the city's geopolitical relevance to capture enough attention to become a recipient of aid or support. The use of programmes, partnerships, and extraordinary measures to deal with exceptional circumstances is part of most governmental practices. The War on Drugs helped this process with an implacable swiftness. The Merida Initiative was, in effect, the most significant strategy to revert the violent trends occurring in Mexican territory, providing at a national scale what would later become a similar strategy at the local level.

The program shows how Ciudad Juárez has dealt with its stigma of violence: investment in utilitarian infrastructure bereft of sustained social policies to deal with violence. Efforts to recover the city's image lack initiatives to address people's traumas, migratory pressures or discrimination. Instead, extraordinary support has been in the form of helicopters, planes, gamma-ray scanners, intelligence software, dogs and

⁵ In words of the United States State Department: "The Merida Initiative is an unprecedented partnership between the United States and Mexico to fight organized crime and associated violence while furthering respect for human rights and the rule of law. (...) The U.S. Congress has appropriated \$2.5 billion since the Merida Initiative began in Fiscal Year 2008" (United States Department of State, 2017).

armoured vehicles. This supplemental layer of infrastructure extended beyond building works and equipment: it materialised transnational aid and the reinforcement of securitisation as urban features.

This ambivalent economy of power had planning implications. Migration and job opportunities, brought by a booming neo-liberal model, increased the city's extension and density. The aggressiveness of the maquila model had an inevitable spatial demand; factory sites employed hundreds if not thousands of workers, with extensive production lines and large-scale machinery, parking spaces and enough infrastructure to mobilise products efficiently across the border. With almost 300 factories open by the end of the past century, factory enclaves atomised the city nucleus setting operations where speculation gave companies enough advantages and land security to their production chain connections.

Urban density strategies have been not, however, an integrated process between private sector needs and social programmes by the government. Instead of developing housing strategies to complement these sites, maquilas established alternative transport routes, with buses bringing in workers from distant parts of the region, perpetuating the disconnection between workplace and sites of residence. The effect this planning structure has had on the city's density is quite telling, despite steady population increment over the decades, the city's urban growth rate has been much larger. For example, in 1960, when the population was close to 170,000, the population density

was 146 people per hectare; in contrast, by 2000 when Juárez's population had surged to over 1.200,000 inhabitants, population had decreased by almost a third, to 56 people per hectare (INEGI, 2018).

The limits of symbolic infrastructure

In Juárez, a scaled-down version of the *social* side of recovery-from-violence initiatives took place with the Todos Somos Juárez: Reconstruyamos la Ciudad (We are all Juárez: Let us rebuild our city) programme. Announced in February 2010, TSJ was designed as an emergency intervention for a city ravaged by violence resembling urban warfare, with funds coming directly from the Federal Government. This was the same year that Ciudad Juárez became the most violent, murderous city on the planet. For president Calderón, who was about to enter his last year of presidency, a turn-around in the region was essential to demonstrate some semblance of territorial control; it was common agreement that, at that point, the cartels held the upper hand and had turned the War on Drugs into a chaotic confrontation that spilled over all sectors of society.

TSJ was designed with timed results, to deliver quantifiable results, setting benchmarks every few months in distinct categories or actions. Although the language behind the programme was to supply social mobility and inclusive development, the bulk of the funding was destined to security measures. Even as Juárez's society was in desperate

need of community investment, this plan for transformation was another exceptional allocation of budget to deal with war through other means.

Programmes like TSJ can be easily targeted because its aims were clearly laid out and thus easier to gauge. In fairness, TSJ ran parallel to the worst violent period in any city in contemporary Mexican history, and it is naïve to have expected the complete reversal of a deep-rooted process that exceeded the city's capacity for recovery: "This was the neoliberal answer to violence: I put a monument here and there and we pretend the city is back on track. And yet, it is better than nothing—at least it is a social attempt and not another border patrol checkpoint" (Aguirre, personal interview, July 29, 2017).

Using 2010 as reference only, TSJ looks like another failure: its benchmarks attempted a moderately low-scale impact on social issues, and while investment was considerable, most of the funding was targeted at the existing security apparatus, circumventing the usual financing channels to make fast-track reforms to seriously underfunded, strained institutions. Spatially, the money was invested in large scale monumental projects which have had questionable impact; the projects are either hard to access or are in isolated parts of town.

Despite its limited outreach, its concealment of securitisation through a social framework, and measured impact, TSJ was part of a pivotal turn in the War on Drugs. After 2010, and for five years, the scale of violence in Juárez decreased significantly

and consistently (Salazar, 2016). While politically used as an impromptu solution, TSJ gave political value to public interventions, particularly those with tangible visibility in the urban realm. This impact was by design: authorities from the central government to the local administration began a series of important investments to ‘refresh’ the image of the city. Thus, TSJ represents an example of the by-products of checkpoint urbanism, a reactionary attempt at pacification through the insertion of new infrastructure nodes, manufactured sociocultural checkpoints operating in tandem with the securitisation infrastructure that frames them.

The damage that violence kept having on the city’s collective wellbeing did not disappear, but there was a visual transformation that, albeit selective and strategic, figured a renovated city profile that aimed to leave its bloody legacy behind –even if it was coordinated more as a marketing strategy rather than a cohesive social reform. The impetus of TSJ aligned with adjustments in the territorial disputes among cartels and started a process of urban renovation slanted towards maximalism, with large-scale infrastructure projects acting as symbolic rebuttals to the region’s violent infamy.

Spatially, the shift towards renovation made sense where its visibility was more impactful. In a flat territory, defined by a low-density urban layout and a homogenous architectural style, few landmarks stand out aside from the highway system articulated towards the border checkpoints. In some sense, the city was ready for the insertion of projects that encapsulated renovation in physical form; these landmarks would be

instantly visible because of their vantage context, but also because of the budget needed to erect them. As far as political calculations go, costlier schemes were reflective of the effort by local administrations to trigger radical transformation; if the project was expensive, it meant that the renovation of Juárez was proportional to its financing. The correlation between economic calculus and targeted urban design is inherent to any planning process and in the Juárez region this was executed with unmitigated audacity and cynicism.

Conclusion

As Elden (2011:305) points out, “boundaries are an outcome of a concept of territory, rather than its condition,” and yet, in the low intensity war of northern Mexico, there has been a gradual shift of conceptual responsibility. Conflict ‘boundaries’ or ‘zones’ are conveniently read through the prism of territorial determinism, avoiding any burden of proof that places the ‘success’ of violence in the planning instruments that have enabled it: politics, economy, urban planning and, ultimately, the stigmatisation of a territory. As this paper has shown, Ciudad Juárez has been branded by its infamous violence, a label that is part of its cultural perception both nationally and internationally. This recasting of the city as the ultimate space for violence has had material consequences: border restrictions over time and a wave of policies attempting to match the territorial coding of the violent hotspot.

Recent political events around the Mexican border have been a reminder about the power of symbolism and objectifying the notion of threat. Donald Trump's presidency, tumultuous and chaotic, has found constancy in the demonization of a quasi-mythical southern invasion, a successful dog-whistle that rehashes stereotypes and overt racism. At the core of the narrative is 'the Wall' a vague construct that embodies United States policy in its most naked simplicity: an impossible physical barrier meant to provide absolute order and protection from innumerable dangers. With Trump, United States border politics have not changed much from their historical trend towards over-securitisation; rather, his nativist language has equated policy with discourse, conflating both with the resulting division object. Previous United States governments applied sovereignty pressure through carefully planned policies of economic control; this time around, however, it is the wall itself what counts for strategy, policy and result, all simultaneously defining territorial limits and belonging.

Ciudad Juárez case shows that when analysing the region's territory, the issues of sovereignty, control and security intertwine through a combination of market and capital interests, spatial codifications of control and a weakened state apparatus subjected to violence. Considering the international border remains a territorial disruptor, Juárez's urban evolution should be understood as a consequence of the unique characteristics of the borderland, which have helped create conditions where extreme securitisation has operated in parallel to the most extreme violence, and where territorial

autonomy is as much an issue of international sovereignty as it is of illegal strongholds operated by criminal groups.

Amidst this spatial fabric, the framing of a checkpoint urbanism for Ciudad Juarez can allow us to rethink the border and its territorial impact beyond its administrative confines. It expands this notion by shifting away from a specific scale of control and surveillance, and moving from its materiality (walls, fences, customs, scanners, policing) into a wider socio-spatial arrangement. It is an urbanism where checkpoints act as the nodes of an extended matrix of territorial operations, maquilas, traffic routes, symbolism, stigma and spatial violence.

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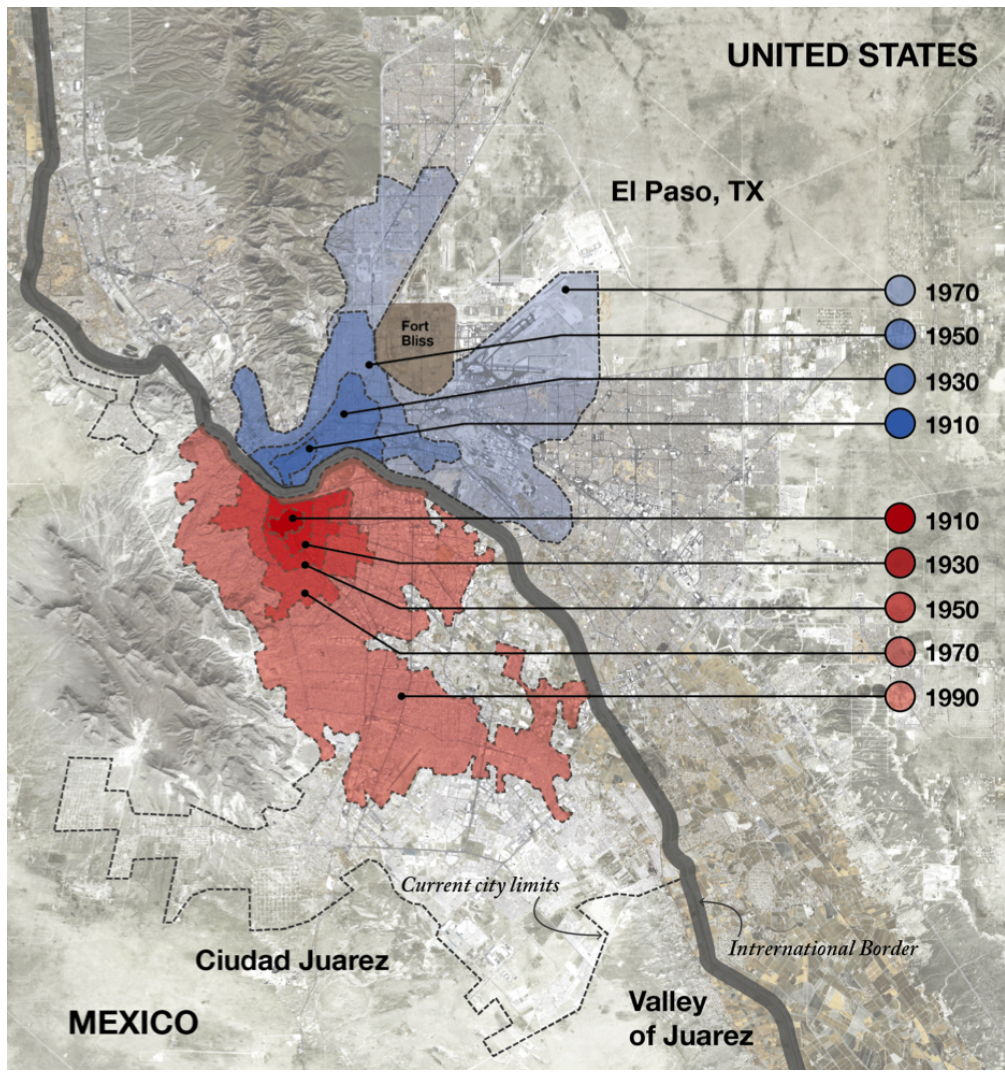


Figure 1. Urban Growth of Ciudad Juarez and El Paso in the last century
Source: Authors' own

400x425mm (59 x 59 DPI)



Figure 2. Public housing scheme in Ciudad Juarez
Photo by Ricardo Martén

159x84mm (72 x 72 DPI)