

The Distributed Vertical Border

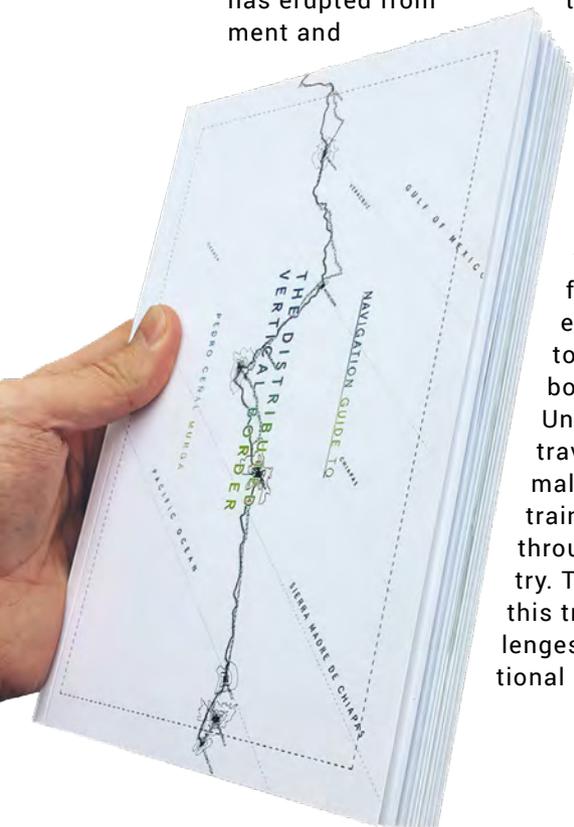
The Distributed Vertical Border is a project that explores the production of space as a result of mass migration. It focuses on architecture that has erupted from the process of displacement and

causes as experienced by undocumented migrants that navigate through clandestine routes from southern Mexico to reach the border with the United States, travelling informally on freight trains that run through the country. The impact of this transit challenges the conventional notion of a

border and proposes an alternative border territory that extends and is distributed beyond the line depicted in maps and in the collective imagination.

After conducting a field trip through these territories, I began drawing a series of maps. In thinking together about the architectural objects I found and the psychogeographical experience surrounding them, I concluded that a travel guide would be an ideal rendering of the project. For me, travelling refers more to leisure or pleasure, and does not necessarily imply attentiveness; the project was more about navigating, an action tied to planning ahead and that entails insightfulness.

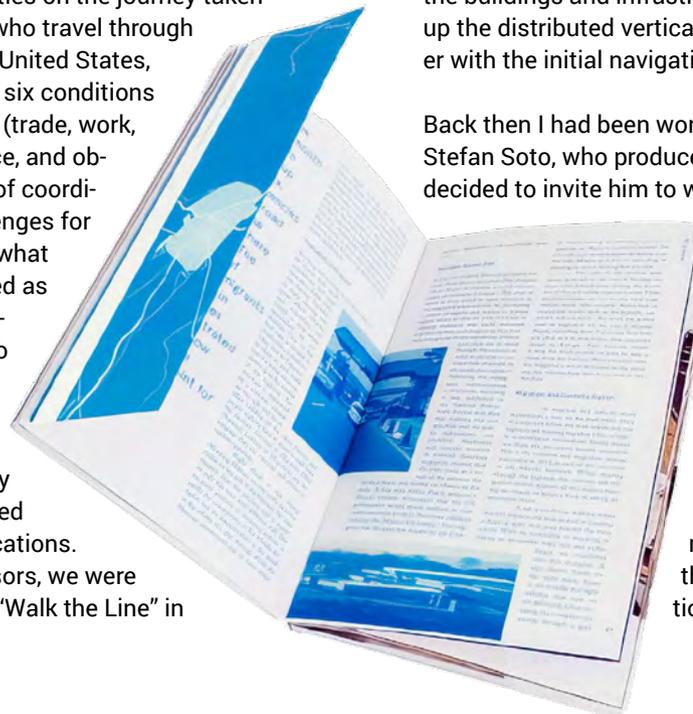
The project finally took the form of a navigation guide comprising critical descriptions for each of the prevailing conditions, as detailed below, along with archival material, essays focused on crucial sites, conceptual illustrations of key buildings and sites. The pages were divided into six sections – each represented by a specific town (or stop) and a series of maps ranging from the zoomed out to ones focused on detailed locations.



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Pedro
Ceñal
Murga

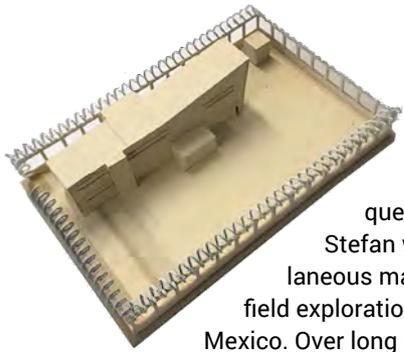
In 2017, alongside two colleagues I started working on the concept of “Proyector”, an independent curatorial platform in Mexico City that sought to promote emerging voices in architectural research. For our inaugural exhibition, we chose to translate the navigation guide into an exhibition. Focused on the first seven cities on the journey taken by undocumented migrants who travel through Mexico heading towards the United States, the exhibition spatialized the six conditions detailed in previous research (trade, work, screening, protection, violence, and obstruction) through a system of coordinates. One of the main challenges for this project was to translate what had originally been formulated as an academic text into a cohesive four-month exhibition. To address this, we assembled a team of people that included María Sevilla, an architect who I had previously worked with and who produced 3D models of some of the locations. Thanks to institutional sponsors, we were able to successfully present “Walk the Line” in



September of 2018. Andrea Carrillo, an artist and graphic designer, designed the exhibition brochure and a publication for which we invited several researchers working on topics close to the argument of the exhibition and who later took part in our public programme.

The exhibition travelled to other cities after its debut in Mexico City and was reshaped in response to different venues. In its latest manifestation, this research was invited to the exhibition “Mapping Along”, presented in Berlin. The ideal language for this iteration was a series of models that showed some of the buildings and infrastructures making up the distributed vertical border, together with the initial navigation guide.

Back then I had been working with Stefan Soto, who produces models, and decided to invite him to work on the project as a long-term collaboration. Compared with “Walk the Line”, this time I had more time to produce the materials. I saw this collaboration with Stefan

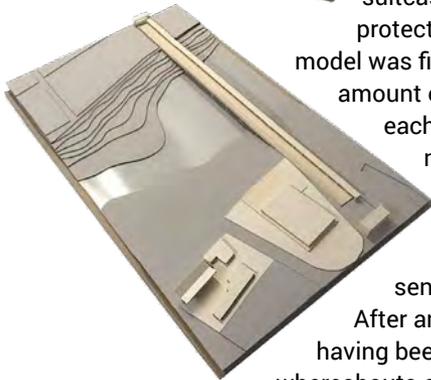


as an opportunity to work with constant feedback and find the best way to depict the objects in question.

Stefan worked with an archive of miscellaneous materials I had produced during my field explorations through the southern states of Mexico. Over long conversations we would fix things so that the models could accurately represent the spatial experiences they intended to reflect.



By February 2021, we had prepared ten impeccable models. I was supposed to ship the models myself and in order to do that, Stefan built a suitcase-box to store the models and protect them from any damage. Each model was fixed in a tray that kept the right amount of space to avoid contact with each other. COVID-19 restrictions made it impossible for me to fly to Berlin to bring the models personally, so it was decided it would be best to send them with FedEx.



After an odyssey of delays and having been kept in the dark about the whereabouts of the package, on Monday 12 April, I woke up to an email from the curatorial team. It had photos of the rigid box that appeared untouched, though later turned out to have signs of having been broken into. The inside seemed to be completely destroyed. Some of the models were torn into pieces and others were damaged. Some even had footprint marks, showing that someone forcibly stepped onto them. Others disappeared and were not in the box any more.



We realized that these models, which depicted migratory phenomena, had been destroyed by the authorities during their long trip from one country to another. When I had tracked the shipment, I saw that it had stopped in Memphis, Tennessee. It stayed there a whole day before crossing the Atlantic Ocean.





After an initial reaction of discontent, when considering it from different perspectives the shipment conveyed powerful meanings. The curatorial team and I decided to show the damaged models with photos of their original appearance, the original box, and a note from me, explaining the journey of the models. The remaining evidence was a chance to talk about forms of violence beyond the damaged box, the fragments, and the lost pieces – they could evoke metaphors of hundreds of thousands of muted bodies that take part in a phenomenon that is, day by day, erased by those in power.

The violence to which this shipment was subjected to speaks, on an objective scale, to how vulnerable migrants are against authorities that oppress them and make them invisible. It also reveals a relegated reality, which constantly needs forces of resistance to be (re)constructed and publicly exposed. A few months ago, the organizers of the exhibition offered to ship the models. They repacked them in a new box, and tried to ship them through FedEx again. The shipment was held in Cologne and then was sent back to Berlin. Once again, it did not manage to clear customs. At the time of writing, the models are kept in a storage room inside the Kunstraum Kreuzberg. Once the package and the traces it holds manage to resist the bureaucratic constraints and ideological forces impeding their movement, the box will travel back to Mexico, reaching its final destination.

