



In contrast to the rigid U.S. border fence (far left), inSITE's new public park, west of the bullring at Playas de Tijuana, uses circles and curves to bring people together at the beach. *Howard Lipin / Union-Tribune*

New park turns attention from a forbidding border fence to a welcoming ocean

By Ann Jarmusch
ARCHITECTURE CRITIC

TIJUANA — The churning ocean and the rigid border fence mark the extreme northwest corner of this sprawling city and its western suburb, Playas de Tijuana.

This dusty, windswept place above a popular sandy beach also occupies the far northwest corner of all of Mexico, Central America and Latin America. Such significance led artist Thomas Glassford and landscape architect José

Parral “to dignify and celebrate this corner” with inSITE’s first permanent project.

Since the early 1990s, when the nonprofit inSITE began sponsoring temporary art installations created for specific sites in San Diego and Tijuana, artists have responded to this confounding spot with provocative works rife with political and social commentary.

How could they resist? Here we find one of the world’s oddest, most brazen culture clashes: a small, jaunty seaside haven forced

to terminate against the steel U.S. border fence, which plunges like a knife across both countries’ public beaches and into the ocean.

When inSITE serves its latest binational, mixed-media feast beginning Friday, visitors will find Mexico’s northwest corner transformed, and the icons of Playas de Tijuana — a lighthouse, a historic border marker, a monumental bullring — highlighted. At least through Nov. 13, when inSITE05 ends, the area’s two streets will be

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A seaside haven juts against a border fence

blocked off, allowing residents and tourists to meander freely through a new park called La Esquina/Jardines Las Playas de Tijuana (The Corner/Playas Gardens).

Native and tropical plants will blanket slopes that only two weeks ago were barren. Wide, curvaceous new concrete walkways and bridges will allow people of all ages to traverse what had been eroded, unstable ground.

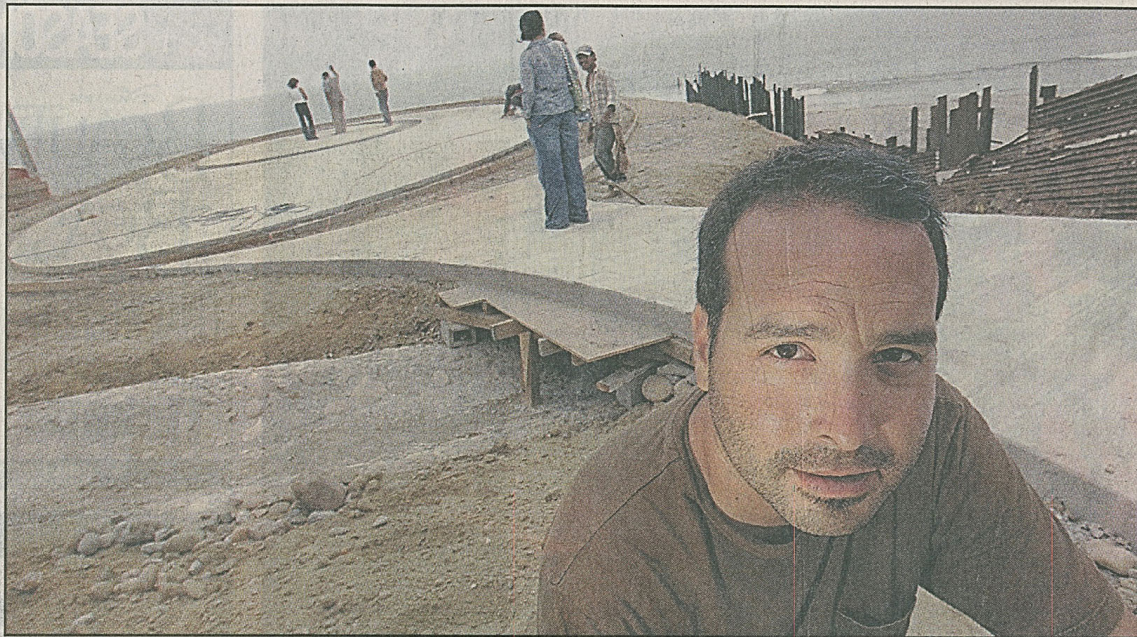
An ocean-view "blufftop" — created over time by rubbish dumped by Mexicans disgusted by the 10-foot-high fence — is now smoothed and sealed by a large, round concrete pad. Battered public restrooms have been replaced by facilities tucked into a circular structure. Its flat roof serves as a second viewing platform.

This urban renewal project has been in the works for two years. Carmen Cuenca, inSITE's executive director for Mexico, has met with at least 20 groups and government agencies — from Playas neighborhood leaders to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security — to muster support and approval for La Esquina/Jardines on both sides of the border. Key cooperation is ongoing from staff at the Tijuana River National Estuarine Research Reserve in Imperial Beach, because the park is partly a restoration and reclamation project, and nature knows no political boundaries.

Businesses have donated materials, such as native plants, and citizens groups have offered to help maintain the park. Both the lighthouse keeper and the coconut vendor, fixtures on this corner throughout inSITE's history, have embraced the improvements, Cuenca said.

"This park would cost \$250,000 (in Mexico, if paid for in full). We did it for \$40,000," said Michael Krichman, inSITE's U.S. executive director. "That's a lot of people giving."

Glassford and Parral have even bigger ambitions for this park, such as extending it into Border Field State Park, on the opposite side of the fence. (Cuenca hopes to resume negotiations with U.S. agencies after November.)



Landscape architect José Parral (above), who lives in San Diego, has spent weeks with crews building La Esquina (The Corner), the oceanfront park he designed with artist Thomas Glassford of Mexico City. Howard Lipin / Union-Tribune

They also envision building a pier over the ocean, something Tijuana lacks, and installing webcams so people in Mexico can watch the U.S. Border Patrol close up and in action.

Cuenca, a Tijuana native, and others, pushed for inSITE's board to agree to tackle this site with lasting improvements. "We don't feel ourselves as (living in) a coastal city. Tijuana is a northern city; it looks north, facing the fence," she said. "This (park) refocuses attention on the ocean. (Glassford and Parral) are reorganizing the urban plan to connect with the ocean."

Glassford, a Laredo, Texas, native who has lived in Mexico City for 15 years, and Parral, a native San Diegan who as a child visited his grandmother in Tijuana, didn't know each other before they were invited to design and build the park. It was inSITE05 curator Osvaldo Sánchez's idea to arrange what Parral good-naturedly calls "a shotgun wedding."

Glassford, 42, and Parral, 33, hit it off, but at first Glassford resisted making the western tip of a raw, resented border barricade the backdrop for their collaboration. Having grown up across the Río Grande from Nuevo Laredo, the artist said by phone from his parents' house in Laredo, he felt using such a

politically charged site would be exploiting a huge problem, like "picking at the scab of the border itself."

He soon changed his mind. "I came to think of it as community renewal, a way to solidify and celebrate this corner. It's one of the most expressive areas of the border, and one of the first places people, especially those from Mexico's interior, want to see in Tijuana. They remember the migrants who have lost their lives (while trying to cross illegally into the United States) when they see the ocean, and the absurd wall made of (steel matting) salvaged from the Gulf War, and the Border Patrol."

Parral crosses the border more often now than he did while growing up, partly because he has friends and colleagues who live in Tijuana. He worked for the San Diego firm Spurlock Poirier Landscape Architecture on the Getty

Garden, designed by artist Robert Irwin at the Brentwood art museum, and the landscape design of Petco Park.

Parral spends long work days at La Esquina/Jardines, his first project to be designed and built independent of a design firm. He said he doesn't mind the effort required, because he's learning so much from everyone involved, from the contractor's foreman and the crew that gave the lighthouse a new coat of

paint to the native-plant aficionado.

"Things are always changing here. The *real* boundary (the ocean) is always fluctuating, while this one," Parral said, pointing to the steel fence being replaced by the U.S. military, "is static." The ocean draws you into what seems like an infinitely serene space, while the fence stops you cold.

"So how can we incorporate that (in the park)?" One way was to offer a series of smooth and sometimes concentric connections between park attractions.

Both Glassford and Parral were initially concerned about seeming to impose their vision of a border park on the people of Playas and Tijuana. Though they conferred with grass-roots groups, getting this ambitious project off the drawing board was extremely difficult, the team and Cuenca said.

But just a few weeks ago, after construction was under way, donations started to materialize and support inSITE had cultivated began to blossom.

"We're trying to offer something that didn't exist before," said Glassford. "The park belongs to the community. They'll take it over and change it as they wish. We just hope we're restoring pride in this corner, instead of having people turn their backs on it."