

Musical Chairs Urbanism.

The third-year curriculum of UCLA's M. Arch. I degree complements two quarter-length Advanced Topics Studios with a year-long Research Studio, serving as a collaborative alternative to thesis and providing enough scope to undertake large or less specific subjects. R. E. "Bob" Somol's 2004-2005 research studio took the city of Tijuana's "Borderline Urbanism" for its subject. Endeavoring to follow the path staked out by such works as *Learning from Las Vegas*, *Los Angeles: the Architecture of Four Ecologies*, and *Delirious New York*, the studio's 12 students investigated the notion that Tijuana is our future.

The findings of the studio, collected in a 300-page monograph entitled *Quick, Loose, Dirty: A Tijuana Novela*, advance an unorthodox set of urbanistic principles unearthed in Tijuana, summarized by the three terms "Quick", "Loose", and "Dirty". In its 18 separate essays, this manifesto of Tijuana espouses speed and ingenuity, over history and monument; the flexible and accidental over the controlled and planned; and ecological susceptibility over sustainability.

Following is a summary of "Musical Chairs Urbanism", my contribution to this document.

In Tijuana, irregularity is regular; exception is *status quo*. In the absence of the type of secure title deeds which prop up land values and promote speculation in the US real estate market, a different set of rules apply, and a loose conception of property prevails. Possession of land takes on a conditional quality. The provisional character of building reflects the provisional nature of ownership, negotiated in the shifting sands of political realities, comprising an obscure world where permanence-loving architects can find no purchase. The vulnerability of property both enriches and detracts from the life of the

city, setting up an urban condition of uncertainty palpably different from that in the US.

The insecurity of property in Tijuana leads to a Musical Chairs model of ownership wherein no one's stake in the city is greater than the extent and duration to which one can calculate control in an endless game theory exercise. The Musical Chairs project distills the conditions of property in Tijuana down to a set of factors and maneuvers that compose an informal rulebook for this new game.

The majority of Tijuana's developed land began as some form of irregular settlement, whether dubiously owned, or outright stolen. Tijuana must be understood as the lucky heir to Mexico's turbulent history of contested property, establishing a background condition for Tijuana's present property relations. In greater detail than we have room to review, the essay provides readers an overview of Mexican history with respect to shifting control of property, providing enough background information to facilitate appreciation of the Musical Chairs model in an historical context. The focus is specifically on four issues: Mexican sovereignty; the cyclical expropriation and return of Catholic Church-owned property; the fortunes of peasants and the establishment of the *ejidos*, which are state-owned, collectively-operated farmlands; and US intervention in Mexican affairs, culminating in NAFTA's effects on *ejido* lands and on Tijuana's economy.

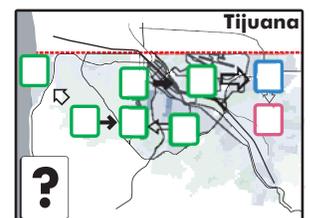
Mexico's history has educated its citizens in loose property relations, leading to a Musical Chairs model of urbanism, where control over property is subject to external pressures, temporal factors, and occasional events of mad scrambling. The effects of this game include unintended uses of buildings constructed with other purposes in mind, strange programmatic mixtures, increased stakes in (and dependence on) political power,

Fall 2004 - Spring 2005.
Studio instructor: R. E. "Bob" Somol.
Drawn with Illustrator.



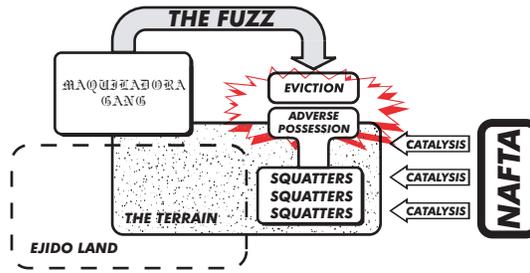
Quick, Loose, Dirty: A Tijuana Novela, by the Tijuana research studio, 2005.

Below: Tijuana represented as a gameboard; list of players, moves, and factors.



-  **PLAYERS:**
the squatters. the maquiladora gang.
the fuzz. regularization agencies.
architects.
-  **MOVES:**
provision of titles. services. eviction.
eminent domain. taxation. credit.
adverse possession. (dis)information.
-  **FACTORS:**
density. political capital. environment
and site. ejido. NAFTA. catalysis.

de facto limits on investment, and incentives to develop land quickly or slowly. The variables of this high-stakes game include: a set of interested players; their actions; and the conditions, internal and external, which influence results. Focusing on the rapidly growing fringe of Tijuana, where the property is at its loosest, this section describes the variables of Musical Chairs Urbanism in preparation for using the terminology as a tool for analyzing Tijuana-specific case studies.



Left: Colonia Maclovio Rojas, a Musical Chairs Diagram. Drawn with Illustrator.

The Play-by-Play in TJ, a series of case studies.

Among the subjects of the essay’s case studies is the situation at the Colonia Maclovio Rojas, illustrated graphically in the diagram at right. The *colonia* exemplifies the contested terrain of Tijuana’s loose property. 1300 residents of the *colonia* in northeastern Tijuana are locked in a bizarre and parasitic relationship with a *Maquiladora* and the putative owner of the privatized *ejido* on which the *colonia* is built. Occupying a former *ejido* land, the contested land is catalyzed by NAFTA, which both encourages the growth of the industrial park and casts the status and ownership of the *ejido* into doubt.

The diagram below graphically depicts the situation at the Colonia Cañon Buenavista. The *colonia* was established by migrant farmworkers primarily from Oaxaca, perceived as undesirables by the Tijuana authorities, on *ejido* land in Baja California. The regulatory agency in charge of the territory persistently raises mortgage rates on the land. Baja California, unique among Mexican states, has established a crime called *despojo agravado*, the crime of leading or instigating others in committing the crime of *despojo*, or “using land or water belonging to someone else, without their authorization, in a furtive manner.” This code has been used to throw housing activists in jail for multi-year sentences. The government’s primary motivation for jailing housing activists is economic, an effort to preserve Baja California as a fertile ground for foreign investments. The *colonia* remains at a stalemate, unable to develop or improve because of residents’ anxiety about the future security of their homes.

Other case studies in the essay examine the conditions of the instant slums that make up developer housing in Tijuana, and the odyssey of Americans who seek to buy cheap beachfront property on Baja California’s coast, despite Constitutional prohibitions against foreigners owning Mexico’s coastland.

Learning from Musical Chairs: tactics for designers.

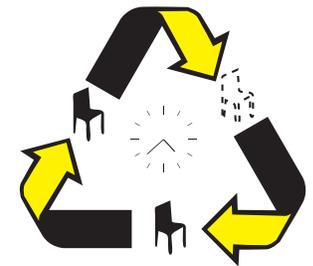
David Baird and Eirik Heintz issued a call to designers to develop “appropriate policies and design tactics” to support unregulated communities; let’s invert this logic and demand instead that unregulated communities develop tactics for designers. This section of the essay speculates on general approaches for applying the lessons of Musical Chairs Urbanism elsewhere, learning from what Tijuana’s loose urbanism does right.

Replace private property with cooperative property models. Cooperative ownership can preserve strong community ties and reduce profiteering and gentrification. Publicly subsidized but cooperatively-owned housing projects could be an effective alternative to the failures of both state-owned, low-income housing projects and private “mixed-income” housing developments.

Pursue phased, long-term-lease models. As an alternative to land held privately in perpetuity, imagine a project where parcels are doled out with highly specific and premeditated zoning, and assigned long-term leases of deliberately selected duration. The leases are long enough to ensure value to leaseholders, but short enough that the building stock would be useful at the expiration of the lease. The city becomes a lab for artificially growing the sort of programmatic wackiness that makes urban environments stimulating.

Establish possession rather than property as a legal state. The notion of possession, signifying active personal use, as a legal state, in place of conventional real property, conjures a vision of an alternative universe, a socialist paradise where speculation in housing is impossible, foreclosure unheard of, but improvement encouraged.

Baird, David and W. Eirik Heintz. “Bi-National Communities and the Unregulated Colonia.” In *Architectural Design*, Vol. 69, no. 7-8, 1999. p. 15.

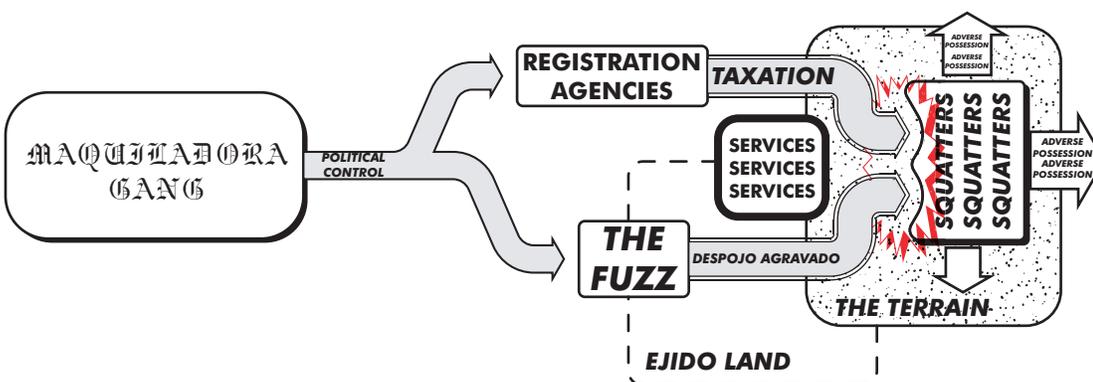


Musical Chairs representation created for visual presentation of essay.



An independent food vendor in an irregular settlement. Photo by author.

As Baird and Heintz note, squatter housing is provisional: “A house in the *colonia* is always in a state of becoming.” In the absence of zoning restrictions, shops pop up in squatter settlements like mushrooms.



Left: Colonia Cañon Buenavista, a Musical Chairs Diagram. Drawn with Illustrator.