

TEETER TOTTER

DESIGN
OF THE YEAR
AWARD WINNER
BUILDS BRIDGES
INSTEAD OF
WALLS

BY JACQUELINE MENDOZA



It's a sunny yet cloudy day on July 28, 2019. A group of architects, artists, and supporters drive to the US-Mexico border with their hearts in their throats for a life-changing moment—for themselves and the families on each side of the wall. Three middle-aged men sit in the bed of an old gray truck to make sure the three important pieces of pink steel are tied down safely for this journey.

The truck suddenly stops, and the three pieces of steel are quickly rushed over to the tall, dark border wall between El Paso and Ciudad Juárez. Once safely installed, neighbors from two vastly different countries—who speak two different languages, and are separated by a ghastly border well—can interact and form a bond for the first time with these bridges built on the wall.

Children sweep out from the village toward the rusted wall to play. Children from the same region, separated by the wall, playing with each other, trying to communicate with each other using two languages. Laughter—a universal language—rings through the air on both sides of the wall for 40 minutes. The morning is filled with

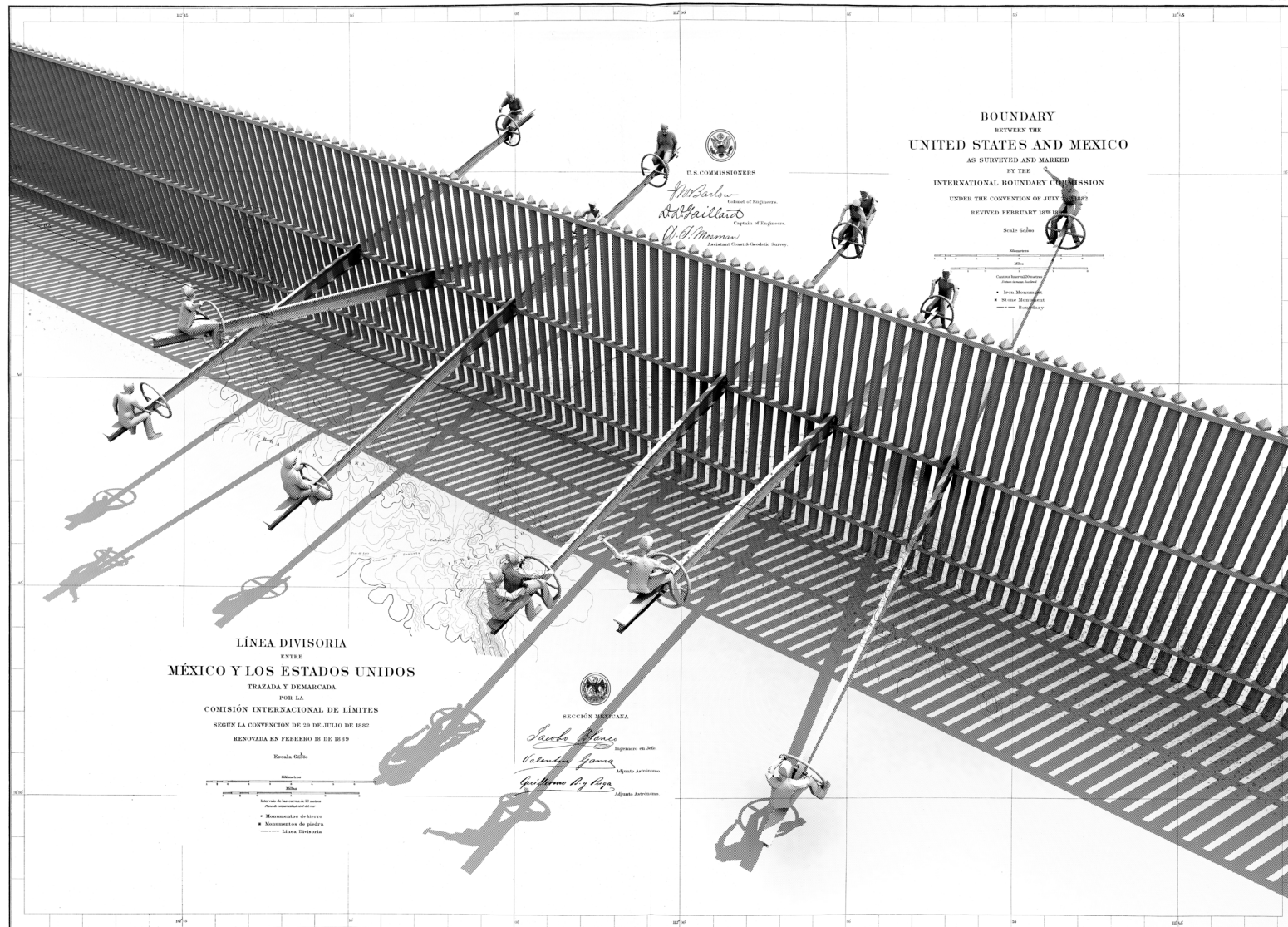
happiness and a sense of togetherness, feelings that are not usually associated with the border wall.

Now, a few years later, the collection of pink teeter-totters that allowed neighbors at the US-Mexico border wall to bridge a connection has won the 2020

Beazley Design of the Year award. Virginia San Fratello and Ronald Rael, the creators of the Teeter-Totter Wall, were invited to be in the Beazley Design Award Exhibition in London in the early Fall of 2019, but because of the COVID-19 pandemic, San Fratello and Rael were not able

to travel. It was later that San Fratello and Rael found out that they not only won the 2020 Beazley Design Transportation category, but they had also won overall Design of the Year.

Creators Virginia San Fratello, an Associate Professor of Design and Department Chair at SJSU,



and Ronald Rael, a Professor of Architecture at UC Berkeley, first started making design proposals and commentary regarding the US-Mexico border after the Secure Fence Act in 2006. This act started large-scale building on the border. San Fratello said, "We saw the ridiculousness of the wall. Why are they doing this? We would drive to El Paso and see the flooding that would occur because the wall prevented water from flowing naturally from the Rio Grande as it had always flowed. We would see a lot of property damage occurring." As time went on San Fratello and Rael not only saw the environmental damage,

but also saw the emotional destruction the border had on people in the neighboring communities. Their mission was to create a project that encourages people to build bridges with others where people least expect it.

In 2009, San Fratello and Rael designed the concept of the teeter-totter at the border for Raul's book *Borderwall as Architecture*, which uses humor to address the complications of building barriers. Their idea would not become a reality for another decade. Coincidentally working in El Paso in the fall of 2018 on a different project, San Fratello and Rael met Omar Rios



from Colectivo Chopeke, who helped the teeter-totter project come alive.

The teeter-totters were made out of the same steel as the US-Mexico border wall. In an Instagram post, Rael wrote, "Steel can divide, or it can bring people together. Same material, different outcomes." The color pink was chosen not only to contrast the dark, rusted steel plates of the wall; it also held significance to the local community. The particular pink pays respect to the women and girls that have been killed since the Femicides in the 90s. San Fratello mentions, "[The Teeter-

Totter Wall project] was also an act of resistance, and we used color to tell that story."

The teeter-totters were completed in January 2019, but the event was pushed back because San Fratello and Rael wanted to get permission to install the teeter-totters at the border wall. "But we could never get permission. Yet, people never said we couldn't do it," San Fratello mentions. Both creators decided that art specifically, architecture, does not always need to ask for permission. They didn't tell the press in fear that the event would be shut down due to a media frenzy. The only





people who knew about the event were the children from the Mexican side of the border—word spread quickly about a fun

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game at the border wall where kids on both sides of the wall could participate.

When Federal Agents on both sides of the border arrived at the teeter-totter event, everyone was suddenly alarmed and

nervous. The mood quickly changed from excitement to fear of the potential threat of being arrested. Yet when San Fratello and Rael explained that the event was to have the children play together, the officers on both sides watched and enjoyed the event from a distance.

The teeter-totter was designed to bring joy and happiness to the community affected by the border wall, but the project impacted millions of people all around the world. Within a day of posting photos and videos on Instagram, the pink teeter-totter went viral, though San Fratello and Rael did not realize this at first because they did not have Internet access on their trip. Two

days later, San Fratello woke up to The Teeter-Totter Wall project all over the news and had hundreds of emails. San Fratello adds, “It somehow resonated with the world because it was this positive joyous event that people needed to see something like this at the time.”

The College of Humanities and the Arts program theme in the fall of 2019 through spring of 2020 was “Borderlands: Immigration and Migration in the 21st Century.” The program included events across design, music, foreign languages, literature, and theatre that re-conceptualized the idea of the

border, focusing on the idea of “Blurring Boundaries, Breaking Barriers, and Building Bridges.” The Teeter-Totter Wall project

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happened to take place at the same time as the Borderlands theme. The Teeter-Totter Wall project not only touched the hearts of millions, but further brought social awareness and initiatives to SJSU.

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has won the 2020 Beazley Design of the Year Award, the project continues to have a social impact years after the event. San Fratello and Rael's project gained press coverage, making the US-Mexico border, for once, have a positive connotation. San Fratello says, "It's kind of amazing how this little inexpensive, very short-lived project is the thing that

captured people's imagination for the year—it shows that things don't have to be expensive, they don't have to be grand, they just need to have a beauty in the way of connecting people. That is what is important." San Fratello and Rael showed the world the simplicity of a complicated subject with a moment that connected people across the

border and around the world. San Fratello and Rael's project ignited a spark within local universities, and around the world, to inspire future initiatives that will make a difference and create social change to build bridges instead of walls in the years to come.