
City of Cast-Offs

Photos by Guillermo Arias

Essay by William Hillyard

Jorge Lopez works shirtless among a mountain of wooden pallets along the cluttered banks of Tijuana's swampy Arroyo Alamar. He stacks the best pallets to one side and busts others into boards, piling them alongside the broken scraps gathered as firewood. Lopez makes his living selling the pallets, the boards, and the firewood to the squatters who live on the opposite bank of the arroyo. A whole pallet goes for two pesos — about 15 cents.

On the hill above the arroyo, hundreds of concrete cubes — the international assembly plants called *maquiladoras* — crowd against the border like chips in the circuit board of a giant machine. The factories import pallets of raw materials to Tijuana for assembly into televisions and electronics, clothes and medical equipment. The finished goods are shipped back to the United States, but the pallets are chucked, then sold to the squatters, who refashion them into walls and fences. The corporations' cast-offs become the homes of the workers they employ.





Hundreds of cobbled-together shacks line the arroyo's fetid ditch. The shantytown is an accretion of scrounged-up lumber scraps wrapped in yellowing plastic sheeting or frayed blue tarpaulin and topped with vinyl banners. Old car tires stacked, interlocking, shore up the banks of the arroyo. It's a neighborhood made from relocated and reinvented American garbage.

The maquiladora workers feed the thirsty pipe of twenty-first-century consumerism and at the same time live in its waste stream. They are the bycatch of globalization, pushed from their homelands in the south and pulled north by the lure of jobs. The squatters descended on the banks of the arroyo en masse, as if dropping from the sky, setting up houses and establishing themselves before authorities could drive them out. *Paracaidistas*, parachutists, the local people call them.

The houses of the more affluent families in the community are made from discarded US garage doors. But the detritus of American tract-home remodels, the pallets, and old, worn-out tires are not just the stuff of the squalid slums of the border poor:





These materials are ubiquitous in the city. Tires and imported American scrap materials are some of the most recognizable architectural elements in Tijuana. You might see a pallet house in an urban in-fill lot or a garage door addition on a middle class block. Tires are such a part of the landscape that in many parts of the city they are the de facto terra firma. They shore up stream banks, stabilize slopes, reclaim flood plains. Take a drive up to the palatial mansions of Tijuana's swanky Chapultepec neighborhood and you'll round embankments bermed with tires and cross roadbeds held in place by rubber retaining walls.

Like the pallets and garage doors, the tires don't originate in Tijuana. California exports more than two million used tires to Mexico every year. The tires, salvaged from recyclers or scavenged from the waste piles behind California tire shops, are resold in the thousands of *llanterias* south of the border, mounted on cars until the remaining tread is exhausted, discarded a second time, and reclaimed once again to become, perhaps, the steps to someone's home.





This cycle of reinvention and reuse seems a testament to the efficiencies of capitalism. Take, for example, Tijuana's daily swap meets that are centered on the resale of American trash. They serve a useful function, acting as the colon of the gut of American consumerism, digesting waste products and nourishing the south-of-the-border economy with jobs and cash. But this is also the parable of an economy grounded in wastefulness, evidence of a society that has become so profligate that its cast-offs can become the foundation for a city of 1.5 million people. And it is a cycle with consequences on both sides of the border. The descending effluence of that culture of waste empties right onto America's back porch.

Piles containing hundreds of thousands to millions of tires dot the border. Tires are rolled into ravines and dumped into heaps on the side of the road. That massive accumulation of waste south of the border doesn't just stay put. The Tijuana River, for example, flushed some 4,000 old, spent car tires north during one day of rain in November 2008, choking protected wetlands on the San Diego side of the border. This sort of thing happens with every major rainstorm. And US tax dollars pay to clean it up. At the same time, diseases like encephalitis and West Nile virus cross the border with mosquitoes born in water standing in the immense piles of abandoned tires. Dengue Fever has made a resurgence along the South Texas border, carried by an exotic mosquito species believed to have been brought to the region in the stagnant water pooled in imported tires.

In Tijuana, along the banks of the Arroyo Alamar, the shanties and shacks of the paracaidistas are slated by the Mexican government to be destroyed. They will relocate residents to a new neighborhood, one built from the ground up: rows of cookie-cutter houses stamped from the virgin land further east — a planned parcel of houses, a little Levittown, a commodified and exported slice of the American Dream. The shacks and shanties will be scraped away and hauled to landfills, where they may be scavenged again and resold piece by piece to the next wave of immigrants. ■

William Hillyard has been visiting Tijuana for more than 25 years — originally as an obnoxious spring-breaker, but more recently to report on cross-border environmental, labor, and, social issues.

Photojournalist Guillermo Arias Camarena has been photographing across Mexico for 15 years as a freelancer for The Associated Press and a staff photographer for national and regional newspapers. In 2009, he won the Premio Nacional de Periodismo Cultural Fernando Benitez for the story "Los Muertos de Todos los Dias" (Everyday Deaths). He lives in Tijuana.