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The conjunction between art and architecture can help make visible the contradictions implicit in colonial dynamics. The installation of a luxury store on a rural road in Marfa, USA, brings to the fore issues such as immigration, the occupation of indigenous lands or even inequality. Even more so if that store is made of adobe, as it dislocates the usual preconceptions about possible materials for luxury architecture. Thus, ancestral and artisanal land is the material with which a critique of the symbols of economic power is constructed – in the very form of one of those symbols.
On July 13, 2005, 22 miles north of the U.S./Mexico border, patrol agents from the Marfa Sector of the United States Border Patrol surrounded five people traveling through the Chihuahua Desert in West Texas. Suspecting illegal activity, the agents had been informed that illegal immigrants were detected by the tethered aerostat radar system hovering overhead that provides counternarcotics and border crossing surveillance and can distinguish targets down to a meter across at ground level.

It is not uncommon that ‘coyotes’ – smugglers involved in human trafficking – drive the desolate roads searching for ‘wets,’ the derogatory term for illegal immigrants, in the vast desert expanse surrounding Marfa. When the five suspects were questioned on the nature of their business the answer was not so clearly comprehended by the Border Patrol. The suspects were a gallery curator, a photographer, an artist, and two architects, who were discussing the selection of the future building site of Prada Marfa, a minimalist sculpture that replicates the luxury boutique where the Fall 2005 line of Prada shoes and bags were to be displayed.

The juxtapositions between the United States and Mexico, or between wealth and poverty, that are clearly evident in the Big Bend region of Texas, define a landscape charged with contrasting conditions in which Prada Marfa is built. The immense ranches that comprise the area, each several thousand acres or larger, often appear to be abandoned, but are owned by many of the wealthiest people in the United States. Most of the ranch owners have ties to oil, and more recently, dot com wealth, including a ranch owned by Amazon CEO and founder Jeff Bezos, where he has announced plans to construct a spaceport just down the road from Prada Marfa. Just as each of these polarities are somehow equally at home and ‘foreign’ to this environment. So too is Prada Marfa, with its delicate interiors and massive walls, schizophrenically positioned in the geopolitical and cultural framework in which it is built. In fact, the process of building the project is as simultaneously contextually grounded and extrinsic as the work itself.

The primary building material used to construct Prada Marfa is dirt. While it may seem odd to construct a building with soil, particularly one with the associated title Prada, building with earth is actually quite common. It is estimated that currently 1/3 of the world’s population – more than 3 billion people on 6 continents – lives, works, or worships in buildings constructed of raw earth. This makes fragmental soil (not to be confused with other materials that come from the ground, such as stone, cement, or metals derived from ore) the most ubiquitous building material on the planet. Earth buildings can also be found in almost every climatic zone on the planet, from the deserts of Africa, Australia and the Americas to England, Denmark, China and the Himalayas.

Whereas earth is a material that westerners commonly perceive to be reserved for the small, humble structures of developing countries, there are earth buildings of almost every architectural type in use by every economic and social class. Examples of churches, hospitals, museums, embassies, and even an airport...
Un vaquero del lugar visitando la escultura. / A local cowboy visiting the sculpture.

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demonstrate the wealth of earth building types found throughout the world. Typically, earth is also considered to be a building material only used in rural environments, but earth architecture can be found just as easily in contemporary urban environments. The world’s first skyscrapers, 11 story buildings first constructed over 500 years ago, continue to be constructed entirely from mud in the dense cities of Yemen. Earth buildings also represent the oldest extant buildings on the planet. Using approximately 7,000,000 mud bricks, the Ziggurat at Ur dates back to 4000 B.C. Taos Pueblo, constructed between 1000 and 1450 A.D., in New Mexico, is the oldest continuously occupied dwelling in North America and was also constructed from raw earth.

While earthen architecture is often considered the building material of the very poor, many wealthy residents inhabit the vast mud brick suburbs of Santa Fe, New Mexico. Ronald Reagan’s former Ranch House (also known as “The Western White House”) in California, Saddam Hussein’s childhood home in Iraq, and Chairman Mao’s childhood home in China were all constructed of mud brick, which speaks to the great breadth of ideological extremes represented by this omnipresent material. Now we can add Prada Marfa to this ‘A-List’ of earthen architecture – the first Prada related building constructed of mud.

A large percentage of buildings in the region surrounding Prada Marfa are also traditionally constructed of mud brick. Often made directly from soil excavated from the build site, mud brick – called adobe in Texas – is a brick made from soil mixed with water and straw and left to dry and harden in the sun. Historically, this was the traditional construction method used by the Mexican and Mexican American population. In the case of Prada Marfa, the 2,500 mud bricks used to construct the building were made by machine and express shipped to the site from a mud brick yard in Alcalde, New Mexico, over 500 miles away. Not unlike the luxury goods that fill the faux-boutique, the mud bricks arriving from this adobe yard are primarily manufactured to supply a growing population of southwestern affluence enamored with the romantic notion of living in a house constructed of earth. Increasingly, the demands made by wealthy interstate immigrants longing for mud brick residences have had a dramatic effect on the cultural and built landscape.

Once ago, buildings made of earth were looked down upon, and ultimately made illegal to construct for several decades. Today, however, mud brick’s increasing popularity has created a demand for the material that has transformed it into a status symbol in the southwestern United States. The humble earthen houses that comprise Marfa’s residential district now fetch several hundred thousand dollars from New Yorkers, Houstonians and Los Angelinos. Thus, what was once a vernacular tradition has transformed into a capitalist driven process that often leaves the traditional descendants of earth dwellers unable to afford mud, forcing them to switch to an ironically more affordable consumption of prefabricated mobile homes and concrete block houses. Much like the knockoffs of Prada bags that are a consequence of the high price tag of authentic Prada merchandise, adobe knockoffs, faux-adobes, are the preferred style of manufactured southwestern homes.

Unlike traditional mud brick buildings, whose bricks are laid in an earthen mortar, the mud bricks used to build Prada Marfa were set in a cement mortar. The juxtaposition between
Los zapatos y bolsos de la línea otoño 2005 de Prada están en exhibición. / The Fall 2005 line of Prada shoes and bags are on display. © James Evans
the industrial material of cement and the traditional mud brick could be read as a nod to Donald Judd, but the combination also represents the bipolar nature of the context in which it is built. In Marfa the use of industrially produced cement, introduced by the U.S. military – each leaving built traces in the landscape that are evident today. By crossing a border between art as commodity and commodity as art, Prada Marfa offers a conceptual interpretation of the latest wave of occupation in the region – Judd and the gentry of gallery owners, artists and art lovers who are his followers. It also raises questions regarding the consequences of this history.

While Prada Marfa was not constructed with illegal labor, mud brick construction is labor intensive, and labor provided by illegal aliens is cheap. The demand for inexpensive labor in America coupled with a search by immigrants for higher paying jobs work hand in hand to prompt people to cross the desert by foot. Although it is difficult to know exactly how many immigrants cross the border in the Marfa sector each year, in 2005 there were 10,536 illegal border-crossing apprehensions and approximately 12 migrant border-crossing deaths. Most of these deaths are attributed to heat stroke or hypothermia. From a distance, illegal aliens walking through the desert at night might perceive the illuminated building to be a possible source of water or shelter. However, upon closer inspection, Prada Marfa reveals an irony that connects the history of the region while also offering a prognostication. It is not uncommon for one’s shoes to wear out during the arduous journey across the desert. In a desperate attempt to protect tired feet from the rough terrain, immigrants are known to try to fashion shoes from the only material available – the yucca plants that dot the landscape. The contrastingly opulent presentation of meticulously organized shoes and bags housed within the familiarity of mud brick walls also foretells the future – a growing socio-economic polarity at a local and, indeed, global level.