

# Shaped by the River

A Conversation with César A. Lopez

by Gabriella Bermea, AIA, NOMA





Borders, both tangible and intangible, have long shaped humanity, and no less so in our border state of Texas. Our experiences with such boundaries shape not only how we perceive the world, but also how we navigate through it. Offering a fresh perspective on the transformative power of crossing borders both physical and metaphorical, 2023–2024 Rome Prize Fellow and El Paso–native César A. Lopez sheds light on the intricate tapestry of cultural boundaries and human experience.

*The following has been edited for clarity and length.*

PART 1  
SHAPED BY THE RIVER

**Gabriella Bermea, AIA, NOMA: Please introduce yourself and your history to our readers. Who are you, and what experiences have influenced your perspective on the world?**

**César A. Lopez:** First, thank you for inviting me to do this interview. It’s an incredible honor, and I hope your readers can learn something from what I have to say.

Let’s start from the beginning. I was born in El Paso, just a few days after my parents came from Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua. This allowed me to gain birthright citizenship in the United States regardless of my parents’ legal status. My family and I straddled the border throughout my upbringing and stitched a binational existence. For instance, my first home was in Ciudad Juárez before I moved to El Paso at a young age. I then went to school in El Paso but would cross the border every weekend to visit family. I spoke Spanish at home and English at school. My parents worked in El Paso, but we’d buy groceries from Juárez for a long time, where the currency exchange between the US dollar and the Mexican peso gave them more earning power.

These experiences, more than anything else, have shaped my worldview. This life of straddling has also made its way into my work. I’m a designer, educator, and researcher of architecture who examines the relationship between territory, building typologies, and the subjects they form.

**GB: Your time in El Paso and Ciudad Juárez has shaped your research and professional journey. Your past professor from El Paso Community College, Emmanuel Moreno, reached out to me to highlight your recognition as a 2023–2024 Rome Prize Fellow. The EPCC community seems to be a driving force for accessibility to the profession,**

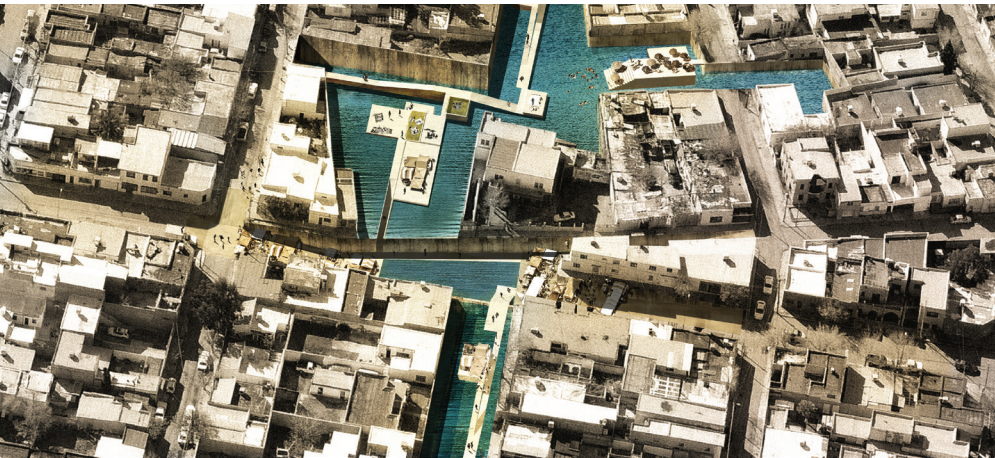
**alongside the dozens of community colleges supporting the path to architecture in the state. Could you elaborate on your educational background?**

**CL:** I was a terrible student! I know people aren’t usually honest to this degree, but I don’t see the need to hide it. I went to public school in El Paso, where, if you know anything about the history of education in the borderlands, you know that assimilation is a key objective. I was in a curriculum that pushed students through. It was restrictive and upsetting, and I wonder why I considered furthering my education after that experience. Instead of paying attention in class, I’d fill my notebooks with drawings. I never traced or drew anything in front of me. Everything came from my imagination.

In my junior year of high school, I was told I would not have enough credits to graduate, so I looked into dual-credit electives at the Center for Career and Technology, a trade/skills school affiliated with my school district. I looked through their offered programs and was asked to rank my top three choices. I got my second choice, drafting and design, which I had listed because of my comfort with drawing. What I thought would be a dull school year turned out to be a pivotal moment in my life because the instructor, Cecilia Orozco, encouraged me in a way no educator had before.

However, I still had a barely passing grade point average and no money to pay for college. So, I enrolled in architecture courses at the El Paso Community College because they had a near-open admission model, and I could use federal financial aid to pay for it. That’s when I had the fortune of taking a class with Emmanuel, who recognized my eagerness to take in as much as possible. He would

*“BORDERLANDS: An Exploitation of the U.S./Mexico Political Geography,” Bracket [Takes Action], by César A. Lopez (Applied Design & Research, 2020)*



give me project prompts for independent study and even let me use a woodshop in his garage to make models. When I applied to the Texas Tech University College of Architecture in El Paso as part of the “Crosswalk” transfer agreement, half of my portfolio was self-driven projects. Studying architecture in the borderland gave me, for the first time in my life, the vocabulary to describe border life as a dynamic between obstacles and certain advantages.

The borderland continued to shape me even after I moved away to attend the California College of the Arts for my master’s in architecture. I chose CCA because it offers a design-based interdisciplinary education where one can straddle the art and design fields. There, I also continued to reflect on my experiences growing up on the border. My graduate thesis project, Borderlands (later published in the compendium *Bracket 4: Takes Action* in 2020), envisioned unleashing the Rio Grande River, which marks the legal boundary between Ciudad Juárez and El Paso, from the upstream levees, dams, and channels into an amorphous field of river tributaries. The intent was to resurge the river and the unfettered transborder foot traffic the region had historically relied on. The tongue-in-cheek outcome of that project was that while multiplying the river would strengthen the border, it would also weaken its political significance in everyday life.

My education is important to me, and you can see that I didn’t follow a traditional path. Over the years, many have told me I needed to come from certain schools or work at certain offices to have the career and impact I wanted. So, I appreciate that *Texas Architect* magazine is doing more interviews like this because we need to hear more about alternative paths into the profession.

PART 2  
PRACTICE AND SPREADING THE REACH

**GB: Let’s explore your research focus. As a fellow Texan with roots along the border—I spent my childhood in Eagle Pass—I am intrigued by the influence of typologies molded by the US–Mexican border and the complexities of representation in this context. How has this theme influenced your goals and discoveries?**

**CL:** My research and design work draws from my experiences growing up on the border as critical knowledge. By overlaying this lens in my research, I’ve looked beyond the reductive narratives we constantly hear about. I began this trajectory a few years ago when I realized that even though I hadn’t lived at the border in nearly a decade, I could still feel its subjectivity. This realization told me that the border experience doesn’t start or end at the border. Instead, the border is an identity belonging to anyone from or affected by the border.

For instance, the border filters people in both directions, as United States labor markets pull immigrants into this country for affordable labor while our divisive politics push them out. For others, you don’t need to cross the border to be a border subject, as policies stemming from the border shape the economic stability of legal and mixed-status groups alike. Others leverage the border by manipulating the differences in law, currency, and cost of living that it marks. In each case, these border subjects demonstrate that the border continues to shape collateral populations in both directions, well beyond the legal boundary.

Over the last few years, I’ve been working on identifying the discrete buildings and interiors where this occurs. Let’s take a typical example from the Department of Motor Vehicles, a ubiquitous government administrative building throughout the United States. This space might seem benign, but for undocumented groups needing a driver’s license for work—or even those of legal status that have mixed-status family members and fear exposing loved ones—the DMV is a dangerous experience.

These buildings typically conjure the experience of a port of entry, with a single entry/exit vestibule and rows of floor-mounted seats facing a line of numbered windows. Yet, the DMV could be a space where border subjects could find solidarity through shared experience if the architecture would affirm it. Unfortunately, architects cede buildings like these to protocol because they’re not seen inherently as design problems. But this is the

“other architecture” that could make a difference for border subjects. This investigation, along with other building and infrastructural typologies found along political boundaries, will be published in an upcoming book I coauthored with Jeffrey S. Nesbit titled *Exclusions, Edges, and Ecologies*.

I am also launching a design research and advocacy practice called Frontera-Nation with Germán Pallares-Avitia, an assistant professor at the Rhode Island School of Design. Next year, we’ll launch our first exhibition at RISD, re-representing the border not as a line or extruded boundary but as an axis to widen the viewer’s lens to the various geographies, ecologies, building types, infrastructures, markers, objects, and histories that inscribe the border. This exhibition launch will also coincide with the first issue of a publication series that will call in more border subjects to share research and experiences, something that fulfills me as a design researcher and as a border subject. What we hope

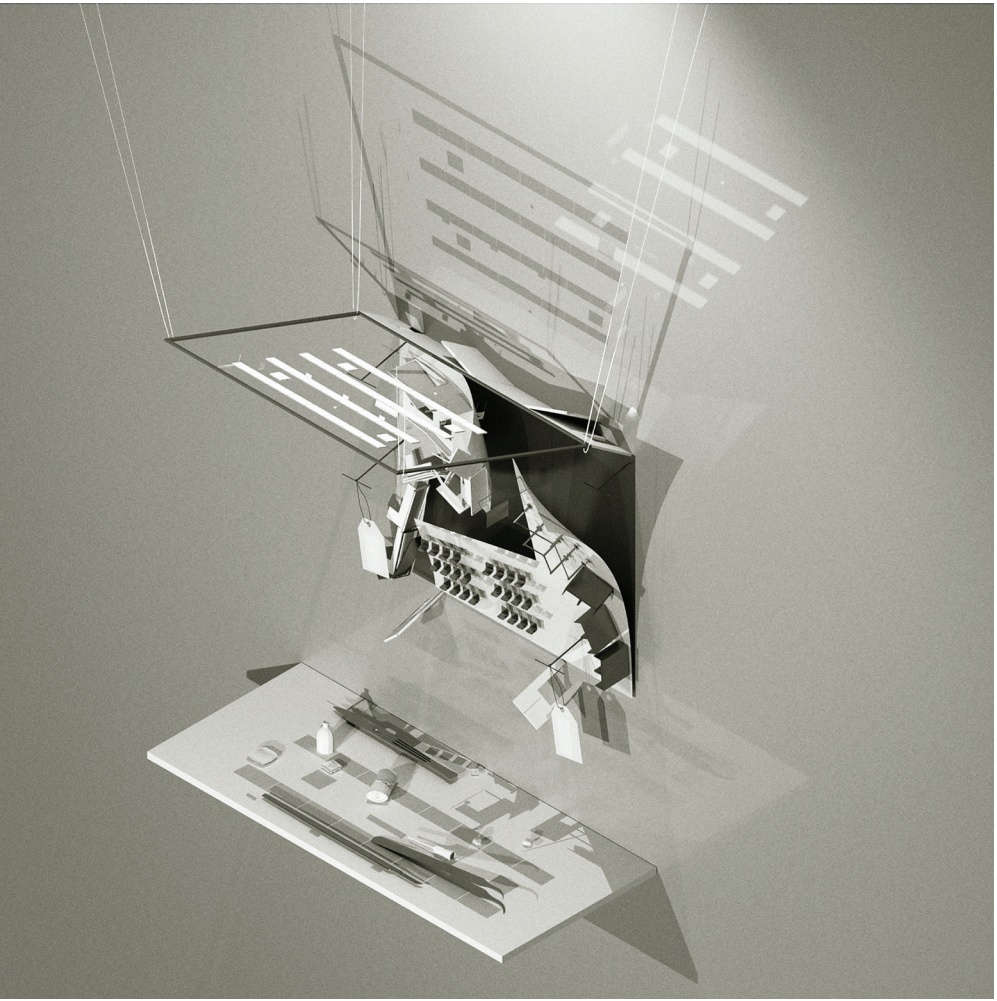
to do together is to reveal the border as a global constellation of sites, spaces, and subjects and present new consciousness among those shaped by borders.

Admittedly, my research is very personal. It took me a long time to incorporate my perspective in the work. After years of being told that “it’s too political” or “difficult to talk about,” I finally asked what made my identity so political. They’re making it political.

**GB: Tell us about your experiences in professional practice and your transition to academia. What experiences had the most impact on your career today?**

**CL:** I’ve worked hard to keep my professional experience as interdisciplinary as my education. I was tremendously lucky to get my first job out of school at Surfacedesign, a landscape architecture

*“Department of Moto Vehicles,” Exclusions, Edges, and Ecologies: An Architecture, by César A. Lopez & Jeffrey S. Nesbit (ACTAR Publishers, forthcoming)*





and urban design firm in San Francisco. While many firms want experience, those entering the field need someone to take a chance on them to get that experience. Surfacedesign was that firm for me—they trusted me, brought me up quickly, and let me demonstrate that I would swim, not sink, when thrown into the pool. (Side note: I can’t swim, but stick with the analogy!)

Before leaving the Bay Area, I worked for Min Design, where, like me, the firm’s principal, E.B. Min, got her start at a landscape architecture office. I worked on various exciting project types and scales there and learned how to interface with clients, communities, and nonprofit organizations. Most importantly, Min Design is where I think I found joy in architecture again at a time when I wasn’t finding much fulfillment in practice. Many of us go through a period where we struggle to find purpose in the profession but don’t often talk about it. I was lucky to have worked for them because they genuinely valued their team.

As for my transition into academia, because I discovered the value of education late in my life, it wasn’t long after graduate school that I decided I wanted teaching to be part of my career. So, in spring 2017, I started teaching studios at the California College of the Arts, the Academy of Art University, and the University of California at Berkeley. I also spent my nights and weekends working on design competitions, research projects, installations/exhibitions, and publications with The Open Workshop. As the associate and representation lead, I continued experimenting with drawing to visualize the politics in our work.

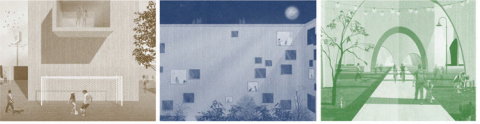
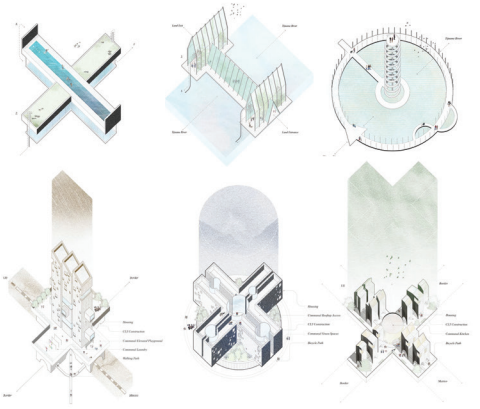
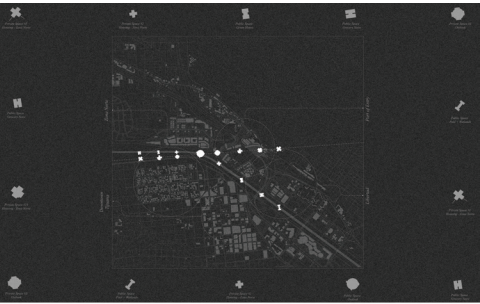
While I’m grateful to be where I am today, I do not condone taking on low-paying teaching gigs and underpaid/unpaid work. It took me a long time to overcome the economic consequences of that time of my career. I am one of too many who made sacrifices like these, and I think it’s important to critique this part of my story. We must understand that making the architectural discipline, profession, and academy fair and accessible to all is still ongoing.

**GB: Could you elaborate on your time at the University of New Mexico? I am particularly interested in your studios focusing on the border, which I believe would resonate with students. Which courses do you consider your standout achievements? Lastly, what are your aspirations for this industry’s future generation of professionals?**

**CL:** The University of New Mexico School of Architecture + Planning students make it an

inspiring place to teach. We are one of the country’s most affordable architectural education schools, meaning many of our students come from communities that need agency in our built environment. In the spring of 2021, I taught a graduate studio called Citizenry Exclusions, which began by asking students to re-represent the Mexico-United States border as layers of political, economic, infrastructural, and ecological systems. This initial study helped students realize that the border is more than a line drawn on a map. Instead, they saw it as a distribution of sites and space, leading them to uncover other populations shaped by the border and the spaces,

*“Cross Border District” by Natasha Ribeiro, from Lopez’s Spring 2021 Citizenry Exclusions design research studio at the UNM School of Architecture.*



buildings, and environments where they experience it. This studio culminated in students doing “border projects” that explored ways to redistribute its sociopolitical dynamics. By the end of the studio, the students hadn’t only developed rich projects. They also began to reflect and recognize how they could see themselves as border subjects regardless of legal status, race, or place of birth. They developed empathy.

Recently, I’ve been collaborating with an incredible team of faculty colleagues to redesign the first- and second-year studios and visualization courses in our undergraduate curriculum. Back in school, these early studios introduced me to mostly European modernist principles and called them “fundamental.” I realized that I never got to draw from the geography I was from to find principles that would be a foundation for my own work. So, the first exercise in my Architectural Design Studio II asked students to abstract geography significant to their identity using a primary graphic language, such as points, lines, figures, hatches, etc. It could be where they come from, a heritage site, or even a place they connected with. This two-dimensional mapping is then extruded to create a tactile drawing that serves as a fictitious site for them to draw form and detail to design a building. In this studio, students can find a foundation in creating form and space that speaks to who they are and how they see the world.

My partner is a K–12 teacher (a real educator!), which, as you can imagine, has exposed me to various methods and approaches in teaching. She’s taught me to resist the hidden curriculum agendas that condition students for inequity in the workplace. Therefore, my courses are embedded with the social and cultural potentials of design to exceed the vocational model. This approach prepares students to work at firms that value their time and perspective. I hope many of them will eventually start their practices. If the architectural profession is going to respond to the social and environmental challenges we face, it needs to allow people from more walks of life to lead.

I look forward to continuing these efforts in my next adventure! In the fall of 2024, I’ll start a new position as an assistant professor at the University of Virginia’s School of Architecture. This geography is, in many ways, another border—between North and South, rural and urban, and through the histories that manifest boundaries for people who have been oppressed by it.

**GB: Currently, you are at the American Academy in Rome. Can you tell us about**

**what you’re working on? Tell us more about your discovery thus far, and what role architecture plays in shaping more socially empowering environments in a world marked by increasing geopolitical tensions and divisions.**

**CL:** First, let me say that the American Academy in Rome is more than just a gift of time and space to work. The best part of the Rome Prize is the stellar community of artists, creatives, and scholars who are more than willing to share their insights and help you see your work through a new lens. I have to pinch myself every day.

My Rome Prize project is called Citizenry Actions. It examines the parallels between the expansion of the Roman Empire and the evolution of the border between Mexico and the United States, specifically focusing on how each constructed liminal notions of citizenship and identity. The project is structured around a series of paired statements.

*A prototype translating the tactile model of a pavilion and exploring formal and spatial limits by Isaac Armenta. Work from the Boundaries, Limits, and Enclosures studio at UNM, coordinated/taught by César A. Lopez in Spring 2023.*

The first is, “I am an American,” which I was taught to say as a child crossing the border from Juárez with my family. This phrase is similar to “civis Romanus sum,” which means, “I am Roman,” which the Roman Empire would teach subjugated populations to say. These are statements of assimilation, where we wash away our cultural identities. These second statements are myths, starting with the Roman claim of being “an open society” and the United States’ claim of being “a nation of immigrants,” both ultimately establishing alterity as a way of life for those who are not natural citizens. Finally, I’ll be looking at the comparisons being made today by anti-immigration advocates who say the “fall of Rome will be the fall of America,” meaning that immigrants coming to the Mexico-United States border are the “barbarians at the gates” and are responsible for the decline of American “greatness.” I’ve spent my time at the academy reading and documenting the areas of Rome where the walls still stand today and how they still mark boundaries.

*Lopez at work at the American Academy in Rome.*



TOP PHOTO BY DANIELE MOLAJOLI, COURTESY THE AMERICAN ACADEMY IN ROME, 2024; BOTTOM PHOTO COURTESY CÉSAR A. LOPEZ



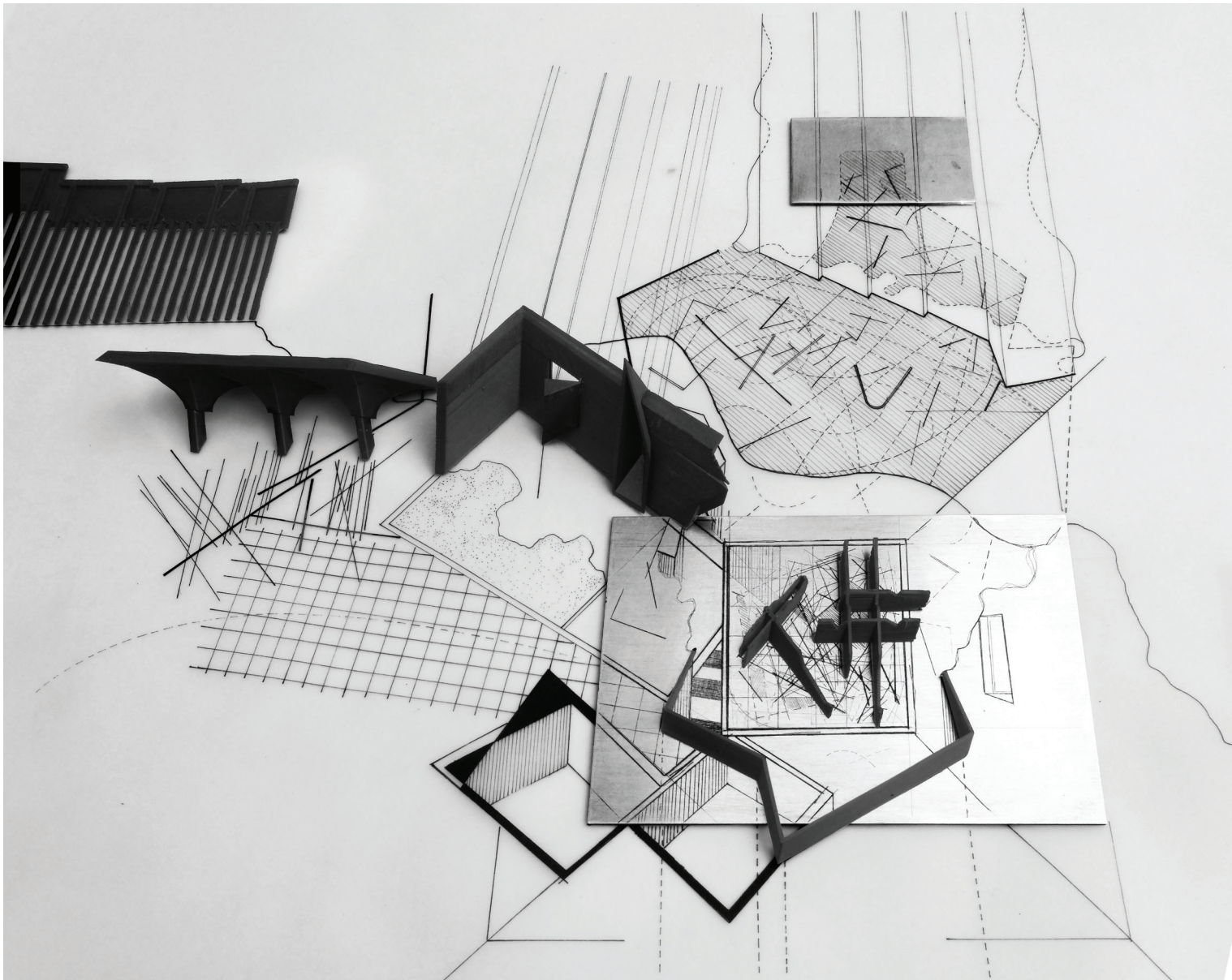


Photo of “Nuestra Casa en Ciudad Juárez” in progress at the American Academy in Rome, Open Studios, 2024

Understanding Rome’s past and present relationship to borders and citizenship can help inform a potential future for the populations shaped by the Mexico–United States border.

At the end of my fellowship, I’ll present a series of tactile drawings as the first phase of the project called *Borderlands Lens*, which prompted me to look inward and recognize the latent boundaries and enclosures that have shaped my identity as a border subject. These visuals are constructed entirely by memory, hence their fragmented appearance—from the hospital where my birth was strategically timed to gain birthright US citizenship to spaces where my identity would be further riddled. I used architectural drafting techniques, dry-point

etchings, and 3D print reliefs to leverage depth and tactility to represent layers of space and their political and psychological dimensions. The switching between carving plates and drawing with a pen changed the geometry and forms.

The notion of citizenship is so entangled with legal status when, ultimately, its core definition is civic participation. My experiences as a border subject have inspired me to do this project while in Rome, especially considering that if I had not been born on American soil, I wouldn’t have been a US citizen and wouldn’t have been eligible for the Rome Prize in the first place.

PART 3  
THE OUTLOOK FOR THE FUTURE

**GB: Looking to the future and the impact on our profession, how can architecture educators address the intersection of the education and border politics? What opportunities and challenges do you see arising for architects and designers in this context?**

**CL:** We live in a world with increasing global displacement, and the ways borders filter people and capital are only becoming more contentious. Architectural education should prepare architects to design for these collateral populations and

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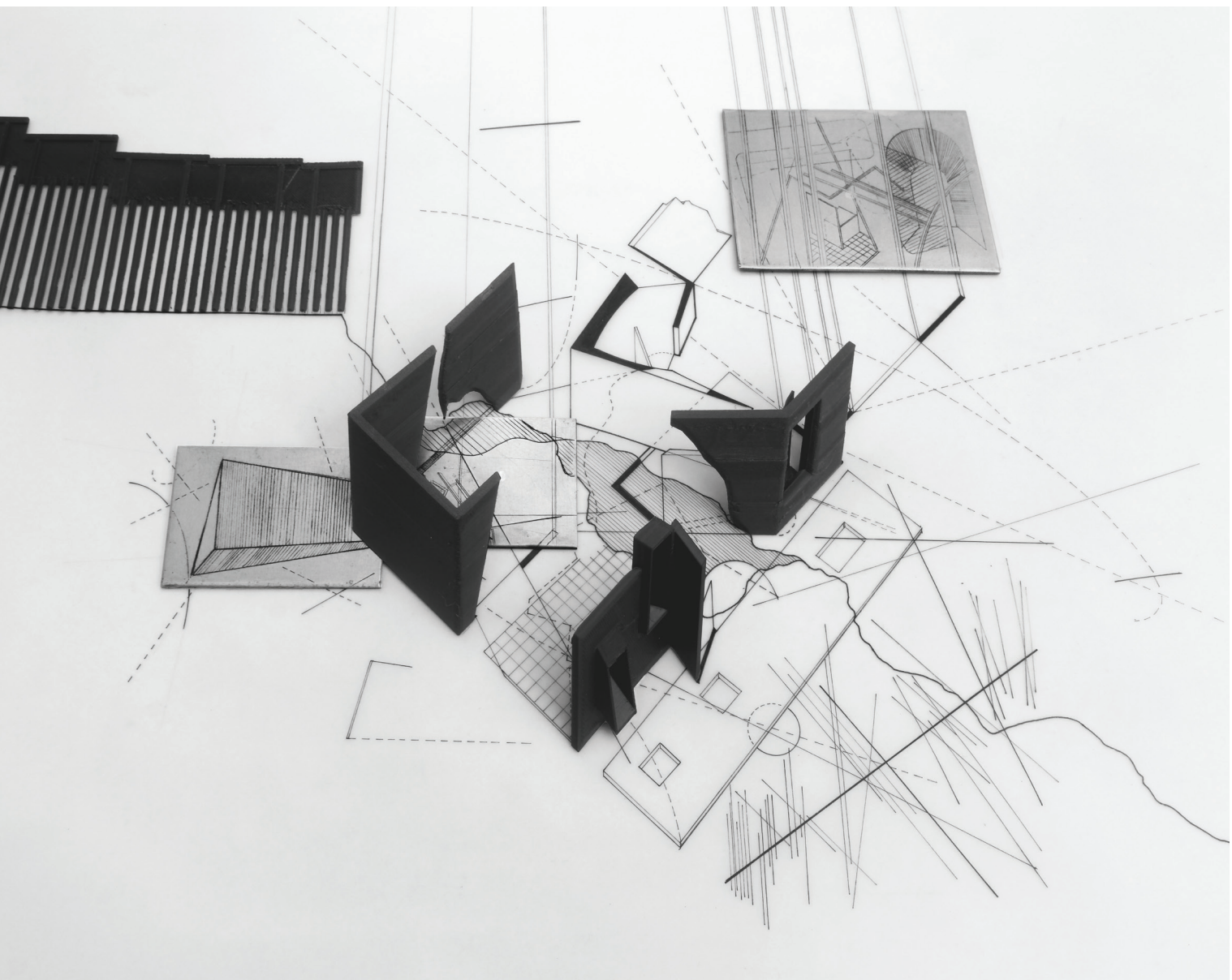


Photo of “Our House in El Paso” in progress at the American Academy in Rome, Open Studios, 2024

environments. Along with climate change and making a more just profession, this is the project of our generation.

As someone from the border, let me say it clearly: we are more than a wall, and we aren’t all immigrants. I want to see all facets of the architectural discipline—education, research, and practice—resist the reductive narratives. To do this, we must create more platforms where border subjects have a voice, like in disciplines and fields of study, such as ethnic studies or political science.

The border is not just a wall! It baffles me that the architectural discipline still gravitates to the most apparent architectural scope at the border: the wall’s height, mass, and materiality. What differentiates me

as a border scholar is that borders are not linear but dispersed—the border is not a space or object; it’s an identity and lens on the world. Those subject to the border are not only immigrants; they can also be mixed or have legal status. You don’t have to cross the border to be shaped by it.

**GB: Is there anything more you would like to share with readers of *Texas Architect* before we conclude?**

**CL:** I was shocked when I first got your invitation to do this interview. I thought, “Who wants to hear from me?” But I’ve been conditioned to feel this way for a long time. But then I realized that you’re

a border kid, too. Many of us who come from non-traditional paths into practice or academia or don’t have an Ivy League stamp on us are made to feel like we don’t fit in, when the truth is our stories are important, too. There are more people like us out here who don’t feel a sense of belonging in this architectural discipline. But I would say we can belong to each other instead. We only need each other to affirm our perspectives.

Gabriella Bermea, AIA, NOMA, is an associate and design architect with VLK Architects. Bermea is the 2024–2025 vice president of practice and recognition for the Texas Society of Architects and the 2024 communications director of the AIA Young Architects Forum.