

EDITED BY SALVATORE ZINGALE

DESIGN

CASE STUDIES, PROJECT  
EXPERIENCES, COMMUNICATION  
CRITICISM

MEETS ALTERITY

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Edited by Salvatore Zingale

## **Design Meets Alterity**

Case Studies, Project Experiences, Communication Criticism

**FrancoAngeli** 



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# Beyond the Wall, Beyond the Object

## Alternative Designs Verging on Alterity

Design is all about creating things, no matter if material or immaterial, Flusser (1999) said. In more detail, it is always about “projected designs”. It is about creating objects, where “object” has to be intended as «what gets in the way, a problem thrown in your path» (1999: 58). As Flusser remarked, indeed, the word *object* is derived from the Latin *objectum*, “problem”: objects are obstacles to be overturned.

According to Zingale, who starts from Flusser, what gets in the way of the designer is always a “problematic objectuality”. And it is possible to think of the expression plane of the artefacts to be designed, that is, the form of things, as a place of «*dialogical mediation* between the intentions of the project and the intentions of use» (Zingale 2008: 64, translation by the author). What happens, however, when a design project is concerned not with imagining a new artefact but with intervening on an already existing object of the world? What happens when the designer’s aim is not to “innovate against” an object (following Maldonado 1970) but to transform its inner meaning?

Both in design fiction and in critical and speculative design (Bleecker 2009; Dunne and Raby 2013), the real object of design seems to reside outside design as mere production, as in traditional design (Pierce 2021; Lupetti 2022). From a semiotic perspective, it would be interesting to focus on design dynamics that seem to exclude production, by thinking in terms of design of new values even within existing objects. This is the aim of this paper, in an attempt that starts from some concrete projects.

### **1. Design fiction, speculative design, critical design. Some introductory remarks**

A first step outside the design territories of utilitarian objects, be they tangible or intangible objects, products, or services, has been Julian Bleeck-

er's design fiction, since the launch of the Near Future Laboratory in 2009 (Bleecker 2009).

Directly quoting Eco (1998) and his idea that «fiction has the same function that games have», as a way to play with our past and present experience, Bleecker defined design fiction as «the deliberate use of diegetic prototypes to suspend disbelief about change» (Bleecker 2022: 20). That is, it is still about designing objects no longer in relation to a present *objectum* but rather in relation to fears, hopes, expectations about the future.

First of all, design fiction is about imagining a future and its issues and finding practical ways (the so-called “diegetic prototypes”) to show at the same time the future scenario and a possible, critical solution. In the design fiction project titled *Slow Messenger* (2007), for example, the speed of receiving messages is inversely related to the emotional content of the message, critically addressing the overwhelming and compulsive communication practises of instant messaging.

A first, systematic and fundamental overview in the territories of “conceptual design”, or “design about ideas”, is in *Speculative Everything. Design, fiction, and social dreaming*, a book by Dunne and Raby (2013) based on their teaching activities at the Royal College of Art (RCA) in London. In this book, objects become conceptual and fantastical, precisely because they do not respond to real needs or serve concrete uses, but their purpose is to allow us to explore imaginative worlds.

In subsequent years, many have pointed out that the user-centred design paradigm is not the only one (Pierce et al. 2015), while the debate on the usefulness of critical design still continues (for a general, updated overview of the debate see Lupetti 2022).

In more detail, critical and speculative design practices have been accused of being unable to overturn the social, political and cultural problems they address, and new boundaries appear, in design literature, between “design doers” and “design thinkers” (Lupetti 2022). Such boundaries mark a difference between traditional production-oriented design and critical design that resists production and therefore they progress towards production. As Pierce (2021) claimed, indeed, conventional design could be defined as *progressional*, as it progressively moves towards production. Such a definition is not so far from Flusser's former conception about object and design. To quote Flusser again:

I come across obstacles in my path (come across the objective, substantial, problematic world); I overturn some of these obstacles (transform them into objects of use, into culture) in order to continue, and the objects thus overturned prove to be obstacles in themselves. [...] The more I continue, the more objective, substantial and problematic culture becomes. (Flusser 1999: 58)

At the opposite, according to Pierce (2021), critical design does not follow a linear path but has a *frictional* tendency. In other words, it would be a matter of *tension with progression*.

## 2. From alternative designs to alterity in design

A good way to try to recompose this divorce between concrete, productive, traditional design and theoretical, abstract, critical design, could be start thinking both traditional and alternative design and its practices in term of alterity.

From a designer perspective, it could be said that every *prefiguration* (Pierce 2021), i.e., every design practice between reflection (about an issue) and production (of an artefact), is a matter of exploration of the unknown. Here reference is made to Zingale (2022) and his theory of alterity *for* design and *in* design:

One might thus compare otherness to a territory to be passed through in many directions [...]. Various phenomenologies of alterity can be found in this territory. For sciences, alterity is the unknown to be known: from the laws governing the physical, chemical, biological world, to the verifiability or falsifiability of hypotheses, theories and heuristic models. For human and social sciences, alterity is the progressive discovery of human variety, [...] both in its individual and collective and cultural dimension. For design sciences, alterity is anything that is a consequence of artefacts, of the interactions they manage to trigger, of the social clothes they confirm or disrupt, of the visions they are able to open up. It is the other as the outcome of an effect of meaning. (Zingale 2022: 38, translation by the author)

In such a vision, every design practice deals with alterity as the (predictable or unpredictable) consequence of design practices in future, because every design practice is a movement from tradition to something new that is at the same time something Other. In innovation, the Other is what the

design practice is dealing with: Moka Bialetti, for example, would have not been possible without Neapolitan *cuccumella* (Zingale 2022: 18). In invention, then, the Other is the totally new dimension opened up by the design practice. In this sense, a sort of frictional tendency could be retraced in any kind of design – and it would be worth mentioning that design itself as a whole is a constant dialogue between alterities all along the design process, from company briefs to designer’s vision to user needs, and so on (Zingale 2022: 24-25).

Bearing these premises in mind, it would be interesting to look more in-depth into what specifically defines alternative design and its frictional tendencies. In other words, as alternative design is resistant to progress in a linear way to go from a problem, an intention or a need to an object, this issue can be explored by taking a closer look in a semiotic perspective, in order to better describe how it deals with alterity.

### **3. A wall is not a line but an architecture. The Mexico-US wall as a base for alternative design projects**

Interesting examples of alternative design are the various projects that Rael San Fratello has dedicated to the Mexico-US wall.

More than 700 miles of barriers have been built since 2006 between Mexico and the United States in order to intercept illegal immigrants. Architects Ronald Rael and Virginia San Fratello (Rael San Fratello), inspired by «people who, on both sides of the border, transform the wall, challenging its existence in remarkably creative ways» (Rael San Fratello 2021), developed numerous proposals for the United States-Mexico border wall. Their proposals are at the same time utopic alternatives and critical interventions, between design, art and activism.

The starting point of the project is a simple, powerful consideration: a border is not just a line on a map, but is a device redesigning at the same time spaces and human relationships and affecting the environment.

As Rael (2011) explained, the Mexico-US wall has to be considered a real architecture, and, we could add, a sort of *alterity machine* because of its ability to create strongly structured oppositions in previously connected areas: on both sides, the area near the wall has been removed from the market economy, isolated from public access and neutralized; on both sides, communities, neighbourhoods and families have been divided, with a mas-

sive «erosion of social infrastructure» (Rael 2011: 412); and in areas such as Nogales, Arizona, the fence works as a dam, diverting water flows on both sides and causing flooding and enormous environmental damage.

In this sense, the wall builds an artificial space where both natural processes and human movements are structured in different ways. In the area around the wall, there are no productive activities, which are instead present in the rest of the territory; there can be no commercial activities; one cannot move freely as is always under the control of the border police. And the establishment of this special regime was not agreed upon by both sides, as it was only desired and made by one side. Therefore, the wall is an additional instrument of migration control, completely unilateral, in the hands of the U.S.

Foucault talked about certain forms of heterotopic places as «privileged or sacred or forbidden places, reserved for individuals who are, in relation to society and to the human environment in which they live, in a state of crisis» (Foucault 1986 [1967]: 24). Thus, the wall and its sides could be described as a sort of crisis heterotopia for aspiring Mexican immigrants: a device to regulate and depower movements in the area, and to discourage (and at best prevent) movement from one area to another.

To face up to these problems, a designer cannot of course tear down the US-Mexico wall. However, considering the wall as a piece of architecture and thinking in terms of wall design can radically transform the wall and the way the wall transforms territory and human relations.

For example, the construction of energy infrastructure along the border could provide electricity across the border, and the steel walls could easily be retrofitted with panels to produce hot water for border cities (Rael 2011; Rael 2017). Such infrastructural improvements theorised by Rael could be categorised as traditional design proposals, i.e., as the response, in design and operational terms, to specific real needs.

In addition, however, Rael and San Fratello worked on other possible transformations of the wall, which can be ascribed more to critical and alternative design, as they are on the borderline between art and design.

These projects can be broken down into three categories, corresponding to three different phases of Ronald Rael and Virginia San Fratello's artistic and design work.

A first, totally exploratory phase is that of drawings and plans for an alternative wall, which in Rael San Fratello's words translated their initial idea

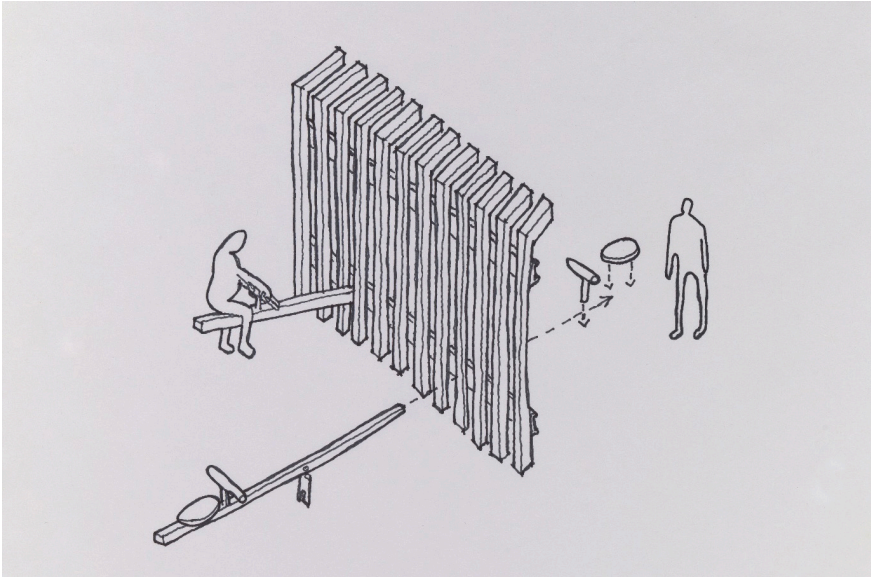


Figure 1. Ronald Rael, Virginia San Fratello, Sketch for *Teeter-Totter Wall*, 2013.\*

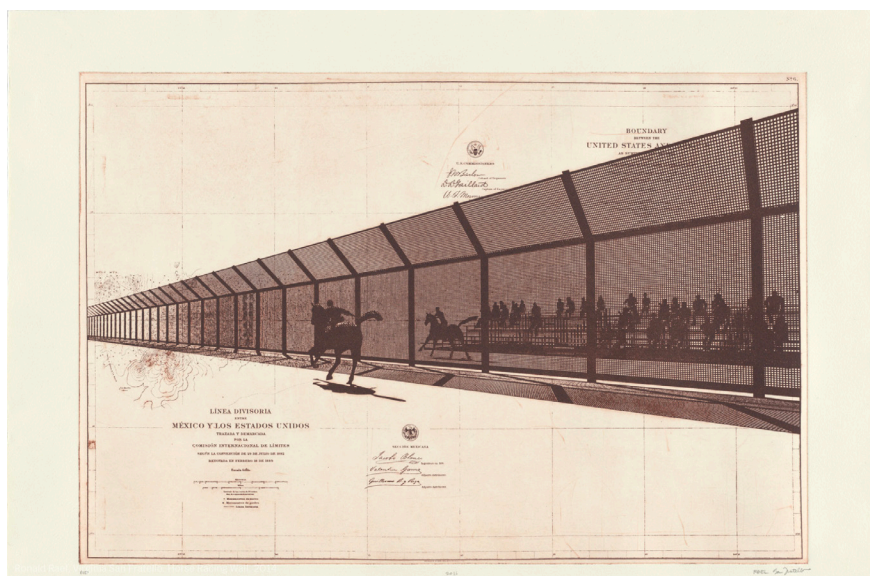
of intervention onto paper (Rael San Fratello 2020). To the second category, linked to the exploration of the territory around the wall and its different “forms of life”, correspond a series of travel notes and drawings (*Recuerdos*). The third category includes the actual design proposals, planned, realised and placed in the site, such as *Teeter-Totter Wall* (2019), winner of Beazley Designs of the Year in 2020 award.

### 3.1. Sketches, drawings and etchings

The drawings can be simple sketches, like the one simply showing the positioning and the working for the teeter-totter (2013, SFMOMA collection), or more elaborated etchings, like *Horse Racing Wall* (2014), now in the MoMA collection (figs. 1-2).

If drawings are just a prefiguration of the final object with all its parts, etchings are much denser in meaning. First of all, they have been all created on reproductions of the 1882 Mexico-US topographic map, but the original

\* All the images are courtesy of Rael San Fratello.



**Figure 2.** Ronald Rael, Virginia San Fratello, *Horse Racing Wall*, 2014.

dividing line is no longer visible, as it has been replaced by a superposed illustration, as in *Horse Racing Wall* (fig. 2).

This illustration shows a complex double wall architecture with two horse riders riding and some people on the stands on the other side of the wall. In the upper right-hand corner, the outline of the wall is superimposed on the American English text of the paper, of which only the signatures remain visible. Instead, the following text in Spanish, located in the bottom right-hand corner, remains legible:

Línea divisoria  
Entre  
Mexico y los Estados Unidos  
Trazada y demarcada  
Por la  
Comisión Internacional de Límites  
Según la convención de 29 de julio de 1882  
Renovada en febrero 18 de 1889





**Figure 3.** Ronald Rael, Virginia San Fratello, *Recuerdos: Snow Globes (Volley Ball Wall)*, 2000-2014.

Such an intervention works by mixing the temporal and design planes, placing the result of a design prefiguration in the past, in a counterfactual way. Indeed, under an engraving that seems to document something already existing and common – the use of the wall as a divider for two distinct corridors – the date of the creation of the dividing line between Mexico and the United States is clearly legible. The short circuit between 1889 (the date of the treaty renewal) and the result of an imaginative project (an unprecedented horse racing wall) brings with it two results: that of institutionalising, in a paradoxical way, a project of alternative design, and that of giving a historical patina to such a (critical, alternative) fiction, showing how far back the roots of the division between the two countries are.

### 3.2. *The Nuevo Grand Tour and its souvenirs*

The second collection of projects is called *Recuerdos* (souvenir). It is composed by a journey and a series of snowballs, keychains and postcards. The journey documents



**Figure 4.** Ronald Rael, Virginia San Fratello, *Recuerdos: Snow Globes (Xylophone Wall)*, 2000-2014.

a series of scenarios, real and imagined, along the U.S.-Mexico Border Wall. [...] Almost exactly the distance of the Grand Tour, the migratory route for upper-class European men that went from London to Rome, this journey stretches along the southern border for 1,931 miles. This *Nuevo* Grand Tour traces the consequences of a security infrastructure that stands both conceptually and physically perpendicular to human migration. (Rael San Fratello 2021)

Both the journey and souvenirs account for single acts of resistance to the wall as a simple boundary, documenting real or just imagined wall transformation as remarkable examples of a civil (and human) resistance to the wall, systematically subverting not the wall itself but the idea of the wall as a device of exclusion.

Each snowball acts as a memorialization of an individual act of resistance, by showing, as in a precious transparent shrine, something significant to remember: a group of people on the beach playing volley (*Volley Ball Wall*), two children playing on the steel wall (*Xylophone Wall*), a burrito stand for a culinary exchange (*Burrito Wall*). Prohibited actions (such as playing games or having a business along the wall) are visualised as real, and



Figure 5. Ronald Rael, Virginia San Fratello, *Recuerdos: Snow Globes (Burrito Wall)*, 2000-2014.

remind us, by contrast, that such common activities are actually prohibited by the heterotopic regime of the wall (figs. 3-5). The memorialisation of similar possible Others of the wall also passes through the depowering of the wall as a potentially infinite line. The glass sphere encloses and delimits the wall in its perimeter: it is a piece of wall that we are faced with, not the wall itself. For this reason, too, the contrast between the wall as it actually is and the many possible individual acts of resistance to exclusion and division becomes even stronger.

### 3.3. *A project, for real.* Teeter-Totter Wall

If drawing and etching works as a prefiguration of a (potential or counterfactual) *future*, we could say, and the *Recuerdos* as a memorialization of a possible *past*, there is one Rael San Fratello project working on the *present* of the US-Mexico wall.

On 28 July 2019, indeed, the two activists and their troupe installed three pink teeter-totters into the border wall for children and families from El Paso, Texas, and Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, to play on (figs. 6-7).



**Figures 6-7.** Ronald Rael, Virginia San Fratello, *Teeter-Totter Wall*, installation, El Paso-Ciudad Juárez boundary, July 28, 2019.

For quite an hour, a small (but real) section of the wall became a site of connection, communication and exchange, where «actions that take place on one side of a teeter totter having direct consequence on the other side» (Rael San Fratello 2020). Thanks to *Teeter-Totter Wall*, the children were able to

play together, as equals, looking each other in the eye and swapping roles, alternately going up and down, as the several photos of that day testify.

Such a device does not abolish the wall but uses it in a new way, transforming the high steel boundaries in the main infrastructure for a children swing. In a first step of the project (documented by the very first plans and drawings), the wings of the swing were so long that it looked like quite able to launch a person across the border. In the final version it is just 14 feet long, lifting one off the ground 18 feet just like a classic swing (Rael San Fratello 2020).

In other words, the *Teeter-Totter Wall* has been designed not to trespass the border, but to radically transform its meaning by keeping it working. What happens, anyway, is that for children playing on the swing the wall is no longer a wall, because a brand-new connection has been established between the two sides of the borders. During the play, there is no longer structural separation between two sides but a new peer-to-peer exchange thanks to the wall itself.

As Virginia San Fratello said, «We ended the event because the children were tired on playing on the Teeter-Totter like they would at any park» (Rael San Fratello 2020). For a few minutes, there were no longer US people and Mexican people or obligations and interdictions, as they all were playmates and could play as long as they wished. In those minutes, the wall did not move by a millimetre but its meaning changed for those children.

#### **4. Between discursive transgression and dialogic alterity. Some final remarks**

In describing the various projects making up Rael San Fratello's intervention on the Mexico-US wall, we tried to emphasise how in the three different project directions the dysphoric reality of the wall is confronted with a new alternative reality.

The main function of the wall, which is to exclude, to differentiate, to unilaterally regulate access, is not cancelled out: however, treating the wall as part of a larger infrastructure (like a net for playing volleyball, or like a room divider) ends up “narcotising” (Eco 1979) its main function (exclusion) and putting new values into circulation (freedom of movement, within the rules of the game of volleyball, as well as sharing, exchange, both commercial and culinary).

Ronald Rael and Virginia San Fratello actually spoke of *depowering* the wall (Rael San Fratello 2021), not overcoming it, and this term is revealing. In traditional design, the response to a problematic objectuality can be a completely new object, capable of performing the same function better, or a whole range of new products, in «a process of proliferation and diversification» (Maldonado 1993: 3). And it is also possible to imagine a new object that better embodies the same function in a completely new form (redesign).

What happens instead in the case of the alternative design projects by Rael San Fratello? In all the projects we examined there is not a classic overturn of the problematic object but there is a sort of frictional juxtaposition of the problematic object and a new alternative object that grows on the first one. From a discursive perspective, at the level of actualization of narrative structures (Greimas and Courtés 1989 [1976]), the enunciatee/observer (i.e., the possible, imaginative user) is invited to weigh up the functional and symbolic value of the existing Mexico-US wall against the alternative one, which could seem physically similar but is perceived as radically different. At the same time, he/she is invited to weigh a dysphoric reality against a euphoric alternative reality, and to react in favour of this second one.

In this sense, these design projects seem to work quite like planar visual representations, by building a whole meaning universe in itself, with its inner system of oppositions and values (Greimas 1989 [1984]), or rather like visual identities in a semantic universe, always implying «a system of transformations which set the rules for a given semantic universe» (Floch 2000 [1995]: 62).

In *Teeter-Totter Wall*, for example, the verticality of the wall is opposed to the horizontality of the swing, and such a swinging movement reveals, by contrast, how static and constrictive the real wall is.

In *Burrito Wall*, the solidity of the steel boundary forbidding free exchange goes in contrast with the permeable nature of the culinary stand, with the wall just distinguishing the chef area from the consumer area:

The burrito wall accommodates for a food cart to be inserted into the wall. The proximity to the wall and the security overhang create shade. Seating is built into the wall, and food, conversation, or a binational game of footsies can occur across the border. (Rael 2011: 414)

Another example of brand new re-using, in terms of meaning and of symbolic values, of the same infrastructure and its main key function (to separate, to forbid movement, to obstruct gaze) is the *Confessional Wall*, developed in the *Recuerdos* collection but directly taken from the real wall' stories:

The division created by the wall often heightens border exchanges. In Friendship Park, beach park that spans both San Diego, CA, and Tijuana, Mexico, intimate exchanges were common. Each Sunday afternoon holy communion was offered through the fence (increasingly as an act of civil disobedience). Here the fence serves as an opportunity for confession, where both confessor and priest must ask that his trespasses be forgiven, as they must transcend the border to perform the rite. (Rael 2011: 414)

In all these alternative design projects, the redesigned wall is invested with new meaning by the questioning of the discourse of the real wall, conceived as a problematic object for anyone concerned with the freedom of movement and welfare of migrants at the border.

Ferri *et al.* (2014), by proposing an analysis of critical design across a collection of exemplars, talked about “discursive transgression” as their main common feature: «they transgress existing discourses, usually through surprising juxtapositions» (2014: 360).

From our point of view, we may also speak of these frictional juxtapositions in terms of putting several positions into mutual dialogue, as something that is able to simultaneously show reality and its possible Other and is thus able, through this dialogical dynamic, to make people think about reality in a new way.

This is what Zingale calls “crossing the negative”, which occurs when «negation and contradiction allow the emergence first of a resistance to the inertia of thought, then of an alternative vision of it» (Zingale 2022: 19, translation mine).

What is at stake in the projects on the Mexico-US wall, indeed, is not just a question of *wall design*, as Rael (2011) himself defined it: it is not just a matter of designing a wall that is habitable, or friendly, for migrants, but rather is a matter of showing the iniquity of the real wall and the forced separations it prescribes, and of showing the need to overcome divisions also on a social, political and economic level.

In this sense, too, Rael San Fratello's design proposals are critical design to all intents and purposes, precisely because the proposal of an alternative vision passes through an exploration of alterity, and in many ways – of a possible Other with respect to the real, but also of the Other (the migrant) with respect to us.

In conclusion, the fact that alternative and critical designs are not design practices dealing with traditional production may not be a problem, from our perspective. This is not only because, as Lupetti argued, «critical design practices can be in tension with one idea of progression» but they «can converge towards production over time» (Lupetti 2022: 88). It is also because, in our opinion, examples such as these of alternative design work on the progression and production of new value systems, hinting at, or even designing, new possibilities and possible Others.

It may be interesting to further explore this line of investigation in order to more thoroughly describe alternative and critical design projects as well as their meaningful dynamics at play.



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