

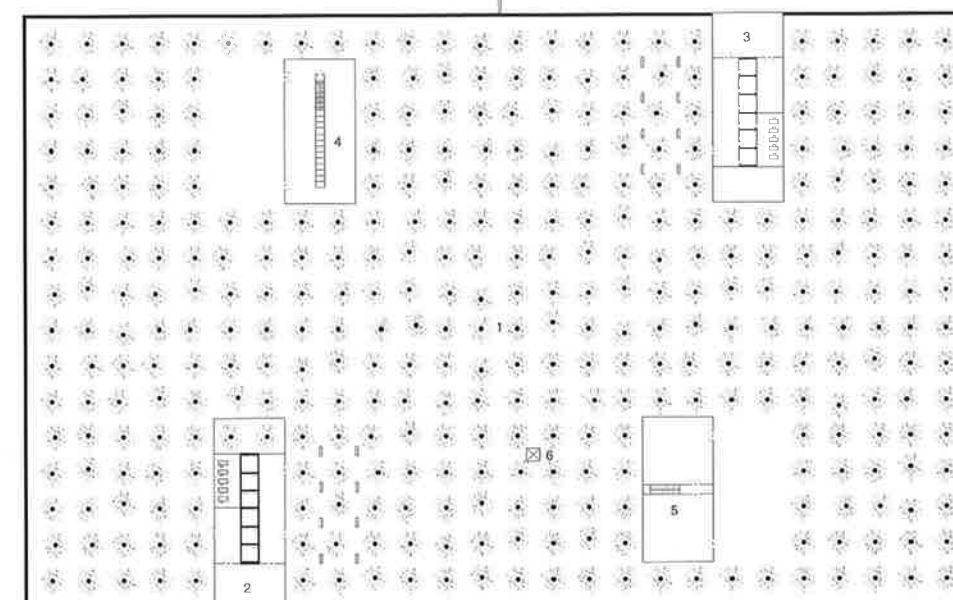


Border Garden

2005 / Anapra, MEX-USA

The pedestrian border crossing between Mexico and the US, a project developed in collaboration with Wonne Ickx, is a massive rectangular volume set in the barren landscape of Anapra. Enclosed by a 9m-high adobe wall, this neutral territory interrupts the endless fence of the demarcated boundary, serving as a bureaucratic waiting gap between the exit from one country and the entrance to the other. Within its walls a dense regular grid of palm trees, fed by a system of irrigation channels, creates an oasis-like garden – a contained and precise cultivated space, opposed to its sprawling surroundings. Four glazed pavilions with solar panel roofs are placed almost symmetrically in the plan – two of them are checkpoints with passport control, customs and administrative offices, while the other two accommodate a library and conference rooms. Like a model of an earthly paradise, this interior garden provides a certain comfort on the way to the promised land, or reflection on the desire for it.

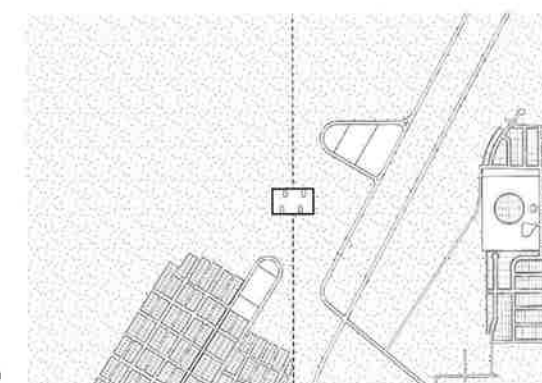
0 25m

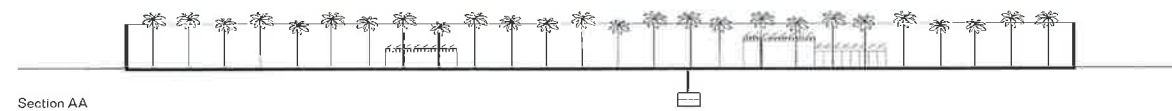


Ground floor plan

- 1 Palm garden-oasis
- 2 Mexico checkpoint-custom
- 3 USA checkpoint-custom
- 4 Library pavilion
- 5 Conference pavilion
- 6 Irrigation system

0 500m





Section AA



East elevation



Border Garden – Christophe Van Gerrewey

This unbuilt design by OFFICE materialises the border that separates the West from those parts of the globe that do not share in its systems of immunity and wealth. Is it not evil to define such a sphere, dominated by capitalism, by means of architecture? And from what perspective do we consider this sphere, and its means of exclusion and inclusion, as 'unjust'? Our reference point on entry (whether it's from the North or the South) hardly makes a difference. The interior is an oasis of trees, humidity, sunshine, shade and auxiliary functions such as toilets, a conference room and storage – all rare occurrences in the middle of the desert. Whatever the visitor is fleeing from or seeking, the conditions here could scarcely be more pleasant. Nevertheless, this outcrop of luxury is situated at a geopolitical line that is as arbitrary as it is important, which means it is nothing without the 'hard matter' of the surrounding walls. It is in this matter that the work of OFFICE tries to find its legitimation. In a way, the embodying and representing of the circumstances of contemporary life is a task for architecture in general. But in reducing and extracting the compositional resources of the architect, while at the same time raising the stakes to an almost absurd degree, the Border Garden obtains allegorical dimensions. Created at the beginning of OFFICE, before they started executing projects, it occupies a position similar to the *Story of the Pool* by Rem Koolhaas from 1977. The difference is that the story of the Border Garden does not want to be a proper story. The project does not talk about ideological and transatlantic relocations; at the most, it makes these movements perceptible through the only means available to architects. This is the border, the walls say, in the only language through which architecture can speak. This is the border, and now it is up to you. The only thing that architects can do, OFFICE declare with this project, is try to make the world less indistinct. Architects cannot fight iniquity and inequality, but they can create the conditions for confrontation, even if this means that they themselves run the risk of becoming complicit in extending the system of injustice and abuse. The mechanisms that rule and dominate our lives are becoming increasingly virtual, abstract and unknowable, seeding the conviction that it no longer matters whether things are real or not. And it is precisely this now omnipresent conviction that is taken as a provocation, as a way out for architecture, and as the starting point for one of the most conceptually precise architectural oeuvres of the twenty-first century. At least the Border Garden – for all its artifice, and for all its reinforcing of external or institutional pretences – is real, and not virtual. That may seem a small thing, and if it does not express direct political action or critical resistance, it does make the world a little easier to understand. As such, the architects of OFFICE are like the narrator of that short story by J. M. Coetzee titled *At the Gate*. The author's alter ego, Elizabeth Costello, is not granted access to a gate until she has 'stated her beliefs'. Until then, she has to remain between the acts of coming and going. But what does an author really believe in? And are these beliefs compatible with a vocation? 'It is not my profession to believe, just to write', Elizabeth says. 'I am a secretary of the invisible.'