



Virginia San  
Fratello and Ronald  
Rael.  
Photo [Alexei Tylevich](#)



# Wait a Minute

Ronald Rael and Virginia San Fratello don't take anything for granted.

Text [Katya Tylevich](#)





A homeless man who contributed his sign to the project.

Example of a sign. The architects collected signs from San Francisco, Oakland, San Jose, San Diego, Los Angeles, Venice, Las Vegas and Denver.



### Sukkah of the Signs

New York City/USA  
2010  
Photos [Rael San Fratello Architects](#)

The Sukkah of the Signs, also known as The Homeless House project, was constructed in New York City's Union Square as part of Sukkah City. For two days the structure, made of 279 signs collected from indigents across the US, was visited by over 150,000 people. Like traditional sukkahs – huts used for 40 years by ancient Israelites wandering in the wilderness – the Sukkah of the Signs called attention to the contemporary state of homelessness. By purchasing homeless signs from the individuals who made them, Rael San Fratello contributed to the short-term needs of people living on the street.

age. After all, what's the beauty of Tuscany or Greece? The exposed stone, where all the stucco has worn away. We have to accept that old can mean beautiful. But that's a problem in Western culture, where everyone wants to stay young forever. Well, we don't want to make buildings that need plastic surgery. We want to love the wrinkles of what we make.

Virginia San Fratello: I think we also build time into our designs.

Rael: We want to build historic monuments of the future. That is, we think about how in 100 years our buildings will be perceived as reflections of the time in which they were built. When we look back 100 years from now at the border wall, for example, what will we think of the instance in time when it was constructed?

San Fratello: And how will this project dismantle? Because, ultimately, it will. What parts will be kept because they're valuable?

Rael: Something like solar panels inserted into the wall might eventually become monuments, which under new conditions could mark the cooperation between two countries instead of a division between them.

### How realistic are discussions like this: are we talking physical objects or big ideas?

Rael: The answer to your question is that we think of ourselves as activists. The project may or may not get realized, but we see it as something that raises a conversation in the realm of architecture. The border wall is one of the largest construction projects in the United States, and it isn't being dealt with by any designers. It's being dealt with by engineers who aren't thinking about context, climate, ecology or people. Also, we fully realize that some of our proposals may seem tongue-in-cheek or satirical, like a lot of our border-wall proposals. I've never made this ▶

I meet Ronald Rael and Virginia San Fratello at the University of California, Berkley, in a 3D print lab where the architects are working on a bench for the national park at Fort Mason, San Francisco. 'Do you want to touch it?' they ask me. The bench, inspired in shape by a native slug, is made of an experimental concrete polymer, which the architects invented. I ask how the material will change with time. 'We don't know,' says Rael. 'We only know that we want it to. We never think in terms of perfect.'

Nine years after founding their practice, Rael and San Fratello have a portfolio of realized and theoretical works, which poke at the faults and imprecisions of architecture, politics and society. They've designed walls made of ivy, hay and mud; they're rethinking digital manufacturing; and they recently proposed solutions for the US-Mexico border wall that include a burrito exchange venue, a waste-water treatment plant

and a solar farm. The architects tell me they consider themselves activists.

'The other day, one of our employees asked, "Why are we always doing things we can't know the outcome of?"' Rael says, admitting that it was a good point before adding, 'But I know it's so that we can arrive at a new place – in design, and maybe in history.'

### Many of your materials, like straw and dirt, imply a certain vulnerability. Doesn't that conflict with the concept of 'timeless architecture'?

Ronald Rael: Yes, the materials are vulnerable, but they're vulnerable in a timeless way. Earth is the oldest building material on the planet, and straw is part of that history. But take our digital materials; they aren't frozen in a perfect world, either. We sandblast and soak them; we think about what happens to them with



The final result was shorter than the initial 5.5-m-tall design, as the New York City Building Code restricted the height to 3 m. To maintain the original intent of framing the sky, the architects turned the structure on its side.

reference to our work before, but you know how honest Stephen Colbert and Jon Stewart are about inserting satire or humour into whatever serious topic they're addressing? That might be a way to think about the way we work as well. We break the ice with some kind of satire in order to talk about very serious things.

#### **My mind goes to the Burrito Wall . . .**

Rael: Occasionally we do get emails from people saying they 'can't take this seriously', but at least we're talking now. There's a dialogue occurring between very distinct parties.

San Fratello: Even if we're not building something physical, we're building a position.

#### **Apart from Rael San Fratello's Border Wall as Architecture project, do you still see yourselves as activists?**

San Fratello: I think so. Another example is The

Homeless House/Sukkah of the Signs, which we realized in New York City.

Rael: We understand homelessness from an outsider's perspective. We can read books and statistics, but how do we step into that realm within our professional acumen? This project was an exchange of knowledge. We've been criticized for 'aestheticizing poverty' or for 'not solving the issue', but we gave insight into realms into which architects typically don't venture.

#### **You don't shy away from the word 'art' in your project descriptions. How does it factor into your practice?**

Rael: Architecture is very much shaped by compromises, but art is not. There's the famous case of Peter Eisenman and Richard Serra collaborating on the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin. Serra withdrew, upset by the compromises he had to make. I may get this quote wrong, but

#### Mud House

Marfa/USA  
2009

The Mud House is a large earthen box, designed to be constructed easily of mud brick and plastered with local soil both inside and out by the client himself, a first-time builder. Inside is a smaller box containing kitchen, bathrooms, storage, boiler and so forth. Thick earthen walls keep the interior cool in summer and, in combination with a radiant-heated concrete floor, warm in winter. Two types of mud bricks, or adobes, were used in the construction. Made in New Mexico, the adobes used for the lower portion have a high compressive strength and are water-resistant. Those used for the upper portion were made in Ojinaga, Mexico; they are lighter in both weight and colour.

# 'We don't want to make buildings that need plastic surgery. We want to love the wrinkles'



A large inner courtyard - open to the interior and to the sky - is both a major source of natural light and an element designed to shield the dwelling from the desert sun.

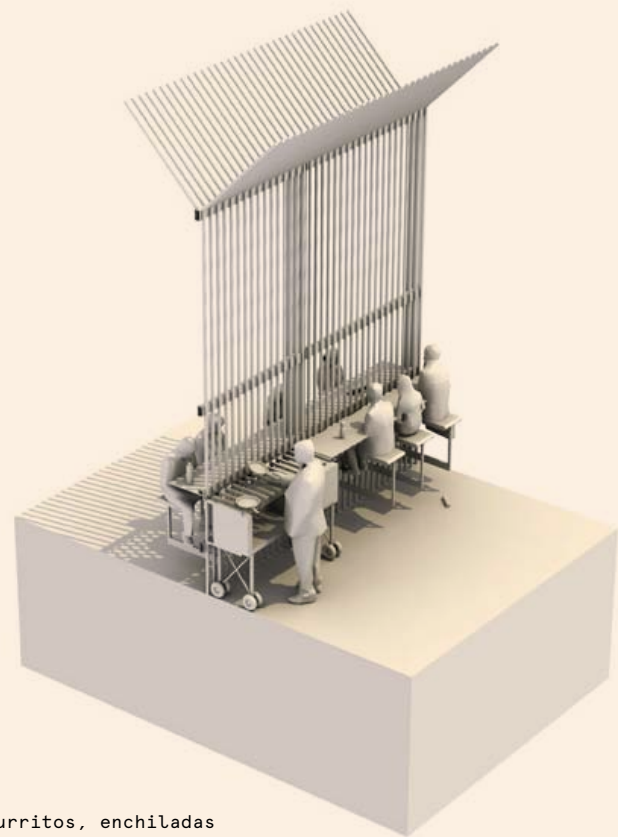
Photo James Garza

A sense of tension between industrial and nonindustrial is the result of contrasts: thick, earthen walls as opposed to concrete lintels, which interpenetrate the façade to create openings; and stainless steel as opposed to earth.

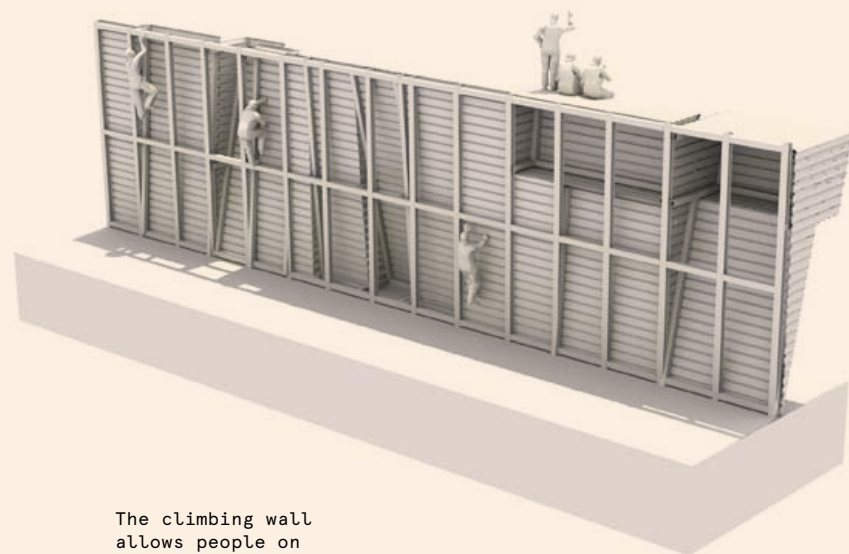
Photo Richard Glover

essentially Serra said: 'The difference between art and architecture is that nobody fucks with art.' That's something we realized, too, when we worked [as architects] on the Prada Marfa project [by artists Elmgreen and Dragset]. At one point, we saw there were electrical wires that had to be at least 10 ft [about 3 m] away from the top of the building; our building was going to encroach on those wires by 1 ft. Being architects and realizing that architecture is shaped by forces, we redesigned the building to see what it would look like lowered by 1 ft. But the artists said, 'No. That's the art; that is the perfect representation.' So we had to raise the telephone-pole wires by 1 ft, which was an incredible endeavour with an incredible cost, but no one fucks with art. So we walk that line. We like to think of ourselves as being somewhere between art and architecture. Maybe that means that we decide when things fuck with us. ▶

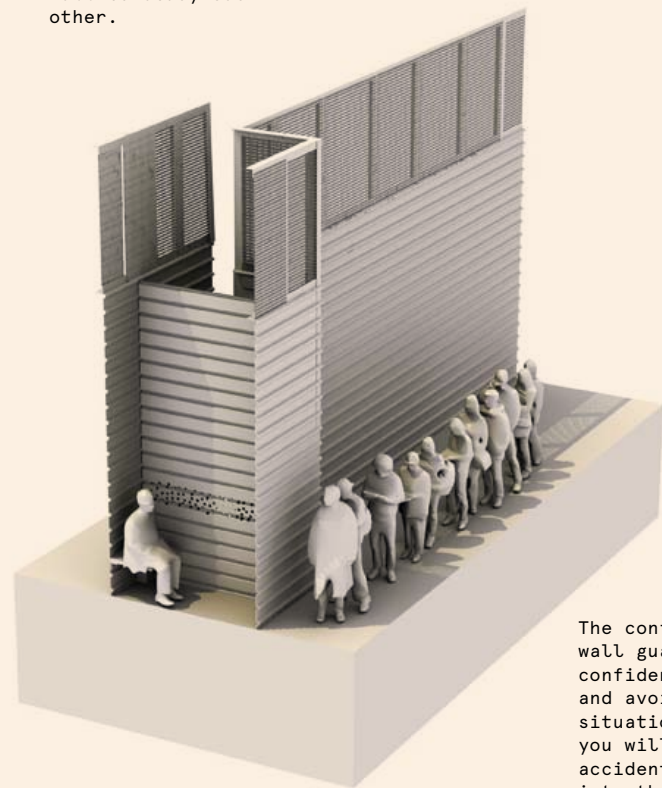




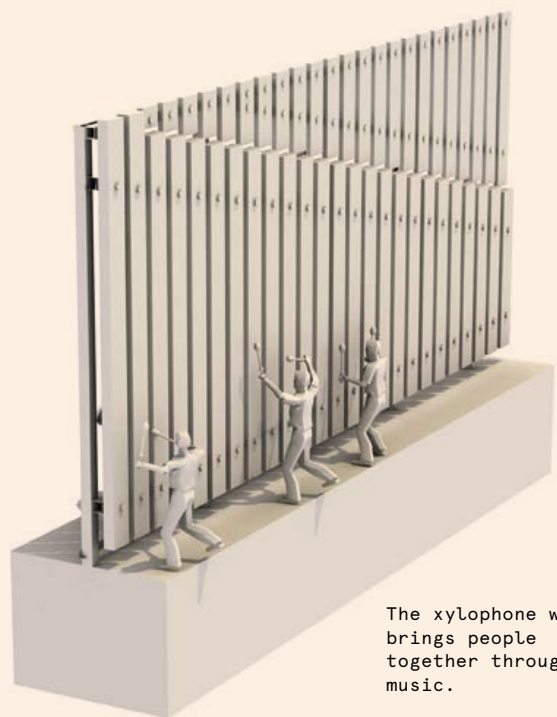
Burritos, enchiladas and fajitas are much better when they come from their country of origin. The burrito wall serves as a takeaway for real Mexican food.



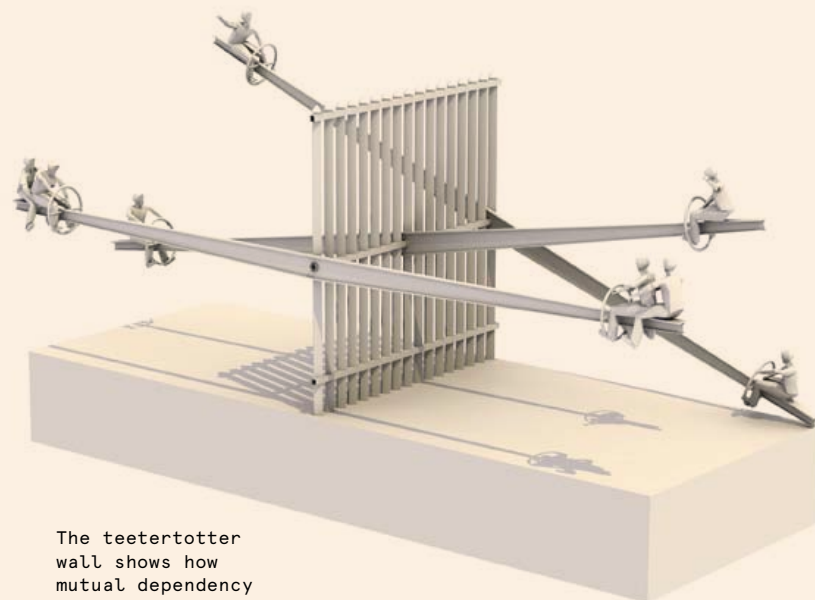
The climbing wall allows people on either side of the wall to study each other.



The confessional wall guarantees confidentiality and avoids awkward situations - you will never accidentally walk into the person you talked to.



The xylophone wall brings people together through music.



The teetertotter wall shows how mutual dependency works on a playful level.

## Border Wall as Architecture

US-Mexican Border Ongoing

By some measures, the US Secure Fence Act of 2006 funded America's largest and most expensive building project of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It finances some 800 miles (nearly 1300 km) of fortification, dividing the US from Mexico at a cost of up to US\$16 million per mile. In many locations the wall is fabricated of steel, wire mesh, concrete - even re-purposed Vietnam-era USAF landing strips. Elsewhere, it makes use of high-tech surveillance systems: aerostat blimps, subterranean probes and heat sensors. Border Wall as Architecture suggests that the wall, at such prices, should be thought of not only as security but also as productive infrastructure - as the very backbone of a borderland economy. Rael San Fratello developed numerous proposals, a few of which are shown here.



The New River (Rio Nuevo) is considered the most polluted river in the United States. A wastewater treatment wall located in the 3-km-long wasteland between the dense border cities of Mexicali, Mexico, and Calexico, California, comprises a linear pond-filtration and purification system.

**'You can take the boy out of the country, but you can't take the country out of the boy'**



The most untapped potential for solar development in the United States lies along the US/Mexico border. Solar farms can provide electricity to the energy-hungry cities of the region.

**'The difference between art and architecture is that nobody fucks with art'**



Prada Marfa is a minimalist, mud brick sculpture, in the middle of the Chihuahuan desert, that replicates a luxury boutique.

Photo [Lizette Kabre](#)

### Prada Marfa

Marfa/USA  
2005

In collaboration with  
[Elmgreen & Dragset](#)

Built in the Big Bend region of Texas, Prada

Marfa questions wealth and poverty. The immense ranches in this area often appear to be abandoned, but such spreads are owned by some of the wealthiest people in the United States. Most of the ranch owners have ties to oil and, more recently, dot-com wealth. An example is Amazon.com CEO and founder Jeff Bezos, who has announced plans to construct a spaceport in the vicinity of Prada Marfa. Prada Marfa, with its delicate interiors and massive walls, embodies the polarities – equally at home and foreign to this environment – of the Big Bend. The primary building material used to construct Prada Marfa was dirt. The building's 2,500 machine-made mud bricks were express-shipped to the site from a brickyard in Alcalde, New Mexico, over 800 km away.

The Fall 2005 line of Prada shoes and bags are on display.

Photo [James Evans](#)



**One concept of Prada Marfa is of a project that naturally disintegrates with time. Is that idea somehow cued into the architecture?**

[San Fratello](#): We thought we would enable erosion by not putting the metal lath underneath the stucco, so that when the stucco came off, the building would erode faster. That was our 'subversive' move to allow it to erode. But other things happened much sooner.

[Rael](#): Prada Marfa is always being shot at and spray-painted. People place little rocks around it, and it's become a kind of shoe graveyard.

**You often build in places like Marfa, away from the architectural spotlight. What role does geography play in your practice?**

[Rael](#): We started on the periphery. That goes back to our upbringing: we both grew up in very rural

environments at the edge, on the fringes. I grew up on a ranch just outside Antonito, Colorado.

[San Fratello](#): And I was born in Savannah, Georgia, and grew up in the countryside of North Carolina and Alabama, where time seems to stand still. It's just like it was 50 years ago.

[Rael](#): These places have radical climates, radical social issues among ethnic groups, radical issues in terms of poverty and religion. We definitely engage the fringes, but we don't see the fringes as the fringes; what other people conceive of as the fringes, we see as reality. When we left those contexts, we brought them with us, in a sense. It reminds me of that saying: 'You can take the boy out of the country, but you can't take the country out of the boy.'

Right now, we're trying something new. It's related to design as much as it is to social experimentation. We bought a building in my hometown, which is in one of the poorest >

*'We want to arrive at a new place – in design, and maybe also in history'*



A family of dirigibles migrates within a city, moving towards areas where a 'heat island effect' is greatest. The airships also migrate seasonally, travelling to southern cities during winter months and northern cities during summer months.

### Migrating Floating Gardens

2010

Migrating Floating Gardens is a concept for new, green, urban environments. The gardens are suspended in the air from large, remote-controlled dirigibles. Each inflatable craft houses thousands of smaller plants attached to long vines. The individual plants attached to the dirigible are equipped with sensors that detect weather, traffic, pollution, noise and other urban data in real time. Controlled by GPS and GIS information and organized in flocking patterns, the pods move through the city in swarms – hydrating, providing shade, and adding oxygen to greenless spaces in the city. Each pod is recharged via its photovoltaic skin. In the evening, pods return to a base in the city where they can refuel, rehydrate and recalculate the data acquired, which can be used for future aerial agricultural aggregations.

counties in the United States. It has a population of about 750 and many abandoned buildings. Little by little, we've been tackling these projects, one of which was to take a 4-x-12-m room, paint the walls, put in a track light and plywood floors – and then call up every artist in the region and ask, 'Would you like to rent a gallery for 300 bucks a month?'

An incredible artist came in, put up his painting, and now people stop by: the town is reacting to this social insertion. For the last ten days, we've been out there stripping the floor of another abandoned space, knocking things down, opening up the space.

San Fratello: We're making another intervention.

Rael: And some architects don't like that word, I know. But, yes, we intervene. We say, 'Wait a minute', and we ask, 'Why?' ◀

[www.rael-sanfratello.com](http://www.rael-sanfratello.com)



The pods move through the city in swarms.