



Closed for Innovation

What's a fence between good neighbors? To the United States government in considering Mexico, it's sophisticated but pretty straightforward: the plans may incorporate so much high technology that the fence is more virtual than real, but in the end it is an imposing barrier, intended to repel, not attract. To architects and designers, such a fence poses a different challenge, but one they often face in their line of work: making the unwelcome welcoming. William L. Hamilton, a reporter for The New York Times, asked a handful of designers to devise a fence for the border.

The Cities of Light - Calvin Tsao's design suggests vibrant little border cities. Mr. Tsao, born in Hong Kong, said his model was the fast-growing city Shenzhen in mainland China, at the border with Hong Kong. He said his concept incorporated the idea that "as development along the border matures, the need to cross the border diminishes."

Having trouble with the neighbors? Put up a fence. If things go well, you hang out at the fence and talk.

That's not generally the thinking for fences between nations; such barriers can't easily mask their harsh purpose. Now a fence is proposed for the 2,000-mile border between the United States and Mexico in an effort to improve national security and stem illegal immigration. The Senate wants 370 miles of it; the House, 698. And President Bush has invited military contractors to devise a "virtual" fence that would seal the existing stopgap fencing with high-technology tools like motion sensors, drones and satellites.

But maybe some form of backyard diplomacy is in order - Mexico is no enemy- and there are obvious suspects for the job: professional designers, whose duty it is to come up with welcome solutions that defy ugly problems; to create appeal where there might be none.

As a classic design challenge, The New York Times asked 13 architects and urban planners to devise the "fence." Several declined because Utey felt it was purely a political issue. "It's a silly thing to design, a conundrum," said Ricardo Scofidio of Diller Scofidio & Renfro in New York. "You might as well leave it to security and engineers."

Four of the five who submitted designs proposed making the boundary a point of innovative integration, not traditional division - something that could be seen, from both sides, as a horizon of opportunity, not as a barrier.

Calvin Tsao, director of the Architectural League of New York and a partner in Tsao & McKown, also proposed an enterprise zone that, in re-creating the border as a series of small, developing cities, would become a border of light that could be seen from space at night.

By WILLIAM L. HAMILTON