

46 Miscarriages in 6 Years:
Suspended Constructions in Baja California

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No other culture celebrates death the way Mexicans do; here, at least once a year, spirits receive more praise and attention than the living. In Mexico, the figure of the spirit manifests itself in particular forms; however, one's reaction will always be personal and contextual. One significant manifestation takes place in the coast of Baja California, where forty six housing projects were halted halfway through construction in 2008 because of the collapsing economy. Structures that were once a part of Baja's economic development plan, *Cocotren*, are now lifeless skeletons abandoned in the sand. The majority of these projects, dying as they reached their final construction stages, led locals to accept their presence and coexist with their spirits. This is both tragic and imprudent. After analyzing Mexican and Baja death rituals, as well as investigating two case studies, it is clear that authorities, financial stakeholders, and locals alike have a misguided attitude of acceptance towards the Cocotren phenomenon.



Cocotren
10 Projects in Tijuana - Rosarito



Blue Beach Condos & Villas, Rosarito, Baja California

Baja California, one of the youngest territories in the world, has a brief history: pre-Hispanic roots, conquest, colonization and independence. Initially, the Cucapá and Pai Pai Indian tribes lived here for 10,000 years before the Spanish arrived in the 1500s. Once settled, spiritual conquest began with the arrival of the Franciscan and Dominican missions in the late 1600s.

After its religious independence, Baja started to grow uncontrollably because of its proximity to California. The United States - Mexico border, a clear separation of two different worlds, resembles that of life and death. Baja is a midway point – a shelter for migrants who attempt to journey north and, halted by the border gates, often stay indefinitely. For both Baja California citizens and the Cocotren spirits, this border condition is a form of purgatory.

Cocotren, or Coastal Corridor of Tijuana – Rosarito – Ensenada, is one of the few carefully planned urban projects in Baja, and the most economically important since its unveiling in 1995.¹ It was meant to be a series of hotel and residential developments stretching along 90 miles of beach south of the California border. Sadly, only 55% of the projects became fully constructed, leaving a net-worth of \$3.1 billion USD in unfinished real estate, 13,000 empty habitation units, and 64,000 jobs vanished.² Regional newspapers, blaming outdated public policy, labeled the Cocotren projects “white elephants on the coast,” acknowledging their obvious presence and the difficulty to sell and get rid of them.³

Despite clear evidence for grieving Baja, the persistent *Mexicanismo* fosters a playful relationship with spirits. A testament to this is the Day of the Dead, a national holiday in Mexico, in which the dead’s spirits and the living festively coexist. Celebrated on November 2nd every year, the alive traditionally offer food and alcoholic gifts to honor the spirits’ return. Unfortunately in Cocotren, the 46 spirits have not only joined the living, they are also being allowed to stay indefinitely.

1. Kamelot, “Estudio Sobre el Inventario de Desarrollos Inmobiliarios Turísticos del Corredor Tijuana, Rosarito, Ensenada y sus Oportunidades de Inversión.” Presentation to Baja California’s Secretary of Tourism, Tijuana, B.C., September, 2007.

2. Caballero, Yolanda. “Invierten 3 mil mmd y no Venden,” Frontera (Tijuana, B.C.), Jul. 3, 2014.

3. See Note 2.



The Residences
 Render exhibited in lobby.
 Image by Bustamante Business Center



The Residences
 Main gate facing highway and white cross on roof

One of the first projects to be noticed driving south from Tijuana is The Residences at Playa Blanca, sitting alongside the road and the beach. Its fortified entrance walls have a pale look for visitors as they exit off the highway. A white cross was placed on top of the main gate, blessing the grounds like a chapel in a cemetery, and series of private guards are stationed outside to protect the building. Upon entering, one's footsteps create an exaggerated echo on the lobby's concrete floor, interrupting the dismal silence. Once inside, endless hallways originate from the center towards the lateral corridors, surrounding the pool courtyard, as the exposed-concrete walls and columns contribute to the darkness. Voids once meant for windows, like the nave of a gothic church, mediate the sunlight intake as they generate shadows and depth. Outside in the courtyard, the paradisiacal pools and waterfalls became bone-dried sculptures as they never filled up with water. For beach tourists, the abandoned building serves as an orientation landmark with its ocean-view façade stopping at the edge of the sand.



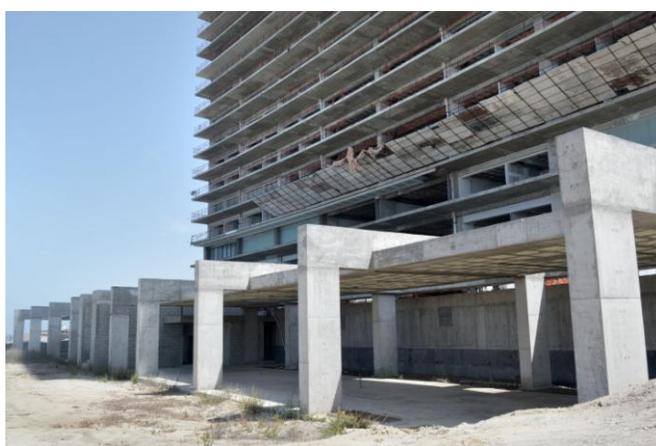
The Residences
 View of façade stopping before beach
 Mexico's coasts are federal land

The story behind The Residences, though complex, is similar to other Cocotren projects: some units managed to be sold before the 2008 interruption and now the entire project is being appropriated by a bank. Currently, the sales office is the heart of The Residences; with functioning utilities, designer furniture, and a full staff, it remains hidden inside the building's chambers. Outside the office, hanged renders and scale models are being exhibited as they once prophesied The Residences' future – an oasis in the desert. Unfortunately, until an outcome is resolved, The Residences will only continue to be a mirage on the coast.



Naos render

Image by Bustamante Business Center



Naos restaurant and pool

Driving further south, approaching Rosarito, a concrete and steel skeleton makes its appearance. Naos, with 400 apartment units, is a curvilinear building whose front-door neighbors are the Coronado Islands. Baja California had big plans for this building; it was meant to be the Cocotren's poster child for luxury, sustainability, and relaxation. The site firmly pressed in between the highway and the beach and a no-longer-operating website and phone number are announced outside. The security guard, as he escorts visitors, demonstrates thorough knowledge of Naos's history, current conditions, and uncertain future. He speaks about it with the same pride and regret a widower wife would demonstrate when speaking about a dead husband. This man is required to sit on a chair next to the monumental concrete tower, just as a person would do in a hospital room, waiting for a loved one to wake up from a coma.

During the visit, the building acknowledges our presence by manifesting itself acoustically. The wind, waves, speeding cars, and even seagulls become Naos' tongue. As we step up its incomplete steel staircase, we engage in a sound dialogue with the spirit. Once upstairs, the bare living spaces scream solitude as the wind blows stronger and resonates with the wood panels covering some windows. The balconies, extending across the sea-side façade, resemble a crime scene with debris on the floor and only a steel rod railing for safety. Out on the ground level, the space meant for the restaurant and pools is an empty concrete gallery, framing the waves and sand as these reclaim their territory.



Naos restaurant & bar

In the hills behind Naos a convention center, also facing the Pacific Ocean, was recently built as part of Baja's tourism initiatives. An evident interruption in its ocean view is Naos' empty vertical structure, wrongfully perceived as a natural component of the landscape. The Cocotren projects have become a part of local culture, advancing conformity over solutions. Both The Residences and Naos are two of Baja's frustrated projects, as explained by Tijuana realtor Luis Bustamante. These projects did not fulfill their final purpose, leading their spirits to fall into a state of "confusion and depression."⁴ Today, this very same lack of energy prevents them from waking up to recovery.

4. Luis Bustamante, verbal communication to Alvaro Alvarez, July 26, 2014.

Sancho said to Don Quijote “Let the dead go to the grave and the alive to the bread.”⁵ Though spirits are certainly welcomed in Mexico, attention should be kept on reality. The Day of the Dead example is a celebration of death *after* a full life of experiences. In order for a building to become an architectural ruin, it has to have been born and lived, ultimately dying after a long life of memories. There were no memories created in Baja California; the Cocotren project was aborted before starting to create experiences with the locals. Today, thousands of daily commuters drive past them on the coastal highway and even recognize their presence by utilizing them as landmarks: “Take the second highway exit past the steel structure,” drivers say mockingly. They are not allowing these spirits to rest.

Apart from the Day of the Dead, Baja California’s Cucapá and Pai Pai tribes have spiritual rituals which differ from the Mexican holiday. These involve the deceased’s cremation and the soul’s journey to a new world. Pai Pai Indians would sing, dance, and cry until the body’s soul had absolutely left this world and then burn the deceased’s belongings. Similarly, the Cucapá would also have a fire ritual and after the ashes from the cremation are deposited into a traditional cemetery, the soul is said to travel through the gate of the beyond. This gate is protected by the Swañj scarab.⁶ This beetle requires the soul’s body to have been completely cremated, otherwise the soul could not cross over to the other side of the gate. Unfortunately, Baja’s version of the Swañj is an entity that left the Cocotren stuck in limbo after their financial death. Because of constant celebration and acceptance of these 46 deaths, Baja Californians are blinded to the fact that the projects’ souls remain stranded in purgatory, not sure to which side of the life-death border they belong.

5. Quijano Forero, Fernando. *Don Quixote*. (Bogota: D’Vinni, 2006), 118.

6. “Mantiene Etnia Cucapa Tradiciones Ancestrales por sus Muertos,” *Notimex*, November 2 2011. http://biblioteca.colson.edu.mx:8082/repositorio-digital/jspui/handle/2012/21137?mode=simple&submit_simple=Mostrar+el+registro+sencillo+del+%C3%ADtem+



La Elegancia, Rosarito, Baja California

The Cocotren spirits are a metaphor to something else, signifying a missing identity amongst locals towards these 46 foreign objects. Their spirits did not leave traces behind the same way humans and architecture ruins do; neither scars nor legacy, only wonder about the unborn building. The Cocotren ghosts will continue to roam the coast without repose until Baja Californians settle the future of these projects. For some of these constructions, any hope left at a chance for life was destroyed in 2008. But as corpses are being excavated, the realization that some of them can still make it is evident. Banks have been tenaciously funding the upkeep of selected projects to counter-attack the decay caused by time – a very risky move. In the case of The Residences, this is a form of artificial life support until the building can wake up from its comma.

What exactly can awake these projects? First, updated public policy from the involved governments to keep up with the recovering economy. Second, for financial stakeholders to not leave these projects lost in limbo – they must help direct them towards the right direction. And last, for locals to adopt the projects as part of their regional and urban identity. As these three forces address Cocotren's questions of existence, more truth and less fantasy will rise to the surface in regards to the border dividing life and death. For Baja Californians, this truth will provide faith in these 46 uncertainties finally finding solace – whether that is in creating memories with the living, or resting their souls with the dead.

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