



Material Histories of Migration: [Sarah Lopez Keynote Lecture for Make. Act. Resist: A Teach-in on Borders and Migration](#)

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Sarah Lopez, a historian of the built environment and migration scholar from the University of Austin, Texas, delivered the opening keynote of the *Make. Act. Resist: A Teach-In on Borders and Migration* series on October 19th. The talk challenged traditional notions of how materials relate to buildings, namely how well they fulfill the function of a building. Like with objects, architecture historians value buildings for their functional or aesthetic qualities, not the history of the materials in their own right. Perhaps, as Lopez made a case for in her talk, we *ought* to pay more attention to such histories, as the accounts of materials are also the stories of migration, people, and social economics. This phenomenon is evident in the story of cantera stone.

How do we use architecture to tell stories? In many ways, the history of architecture is also the history of civilizations. The pyramids tell us of the great power and intelligence of ancient Egyptian civilizations. The ruins of Rome tell the stories of powerful emperors and the wisdom of the Roman culture. Lady Liberty represents a commitment to the home of the free. But what about the laborers who stacked the stones of the pyramids? Or those who brought the stones out of the quarries to build the Pantheon? And what of the people promised new lives in exchange for low paying jobs but who still did not find freedom in the home of the brave? Like these examples, cantera's history reveals the story of transborder migrants and their life-making practices. To demonstrate how the history of a material *is* the history of a culture and people, Lopez focused on two men who transported cantera over the Mexican border into the U.S.: one in California, one in Texas.

Antonio Rodriguez moved from Jalisco, Mexico, to Los Angeles, U.S. Tony, as Lopez called him, worked various “unskilled jobs” before starting a paper company, and then a cantera distribution business. There was a market for cantera in developing neighborhoods where Mexican migrants were buying property and wanted to feel a bit more at home. Since the 1970s, Mexican migrants implemented ways to bring the stone north, resulting in material migration. Businesses like Tony's that both sell cantera and build with it cater to Mexican-American clients in the U.S. who have spearheaded development in what used to be rural areas. As they have imported custom materials and commissioned Mexican-American architects, landscapers, and builders, they have reshaped design norms in those neighborhoods, creating an aesthetic of what Lopez refers to as “immigrant enclaves.” For a Mexican-American client looking for a taste of their ancestral homeland, Tony defines the migrant home through exuberant details. This particular cultural group’s placement among each other creates a vernacular of Mexican diaspora, changing the aesthetic of a town or neighborhood to suit their liking. Not only is the history of cantera also a history of migratory peoples, but a history of regional aesthetics.

Other migrants who work with cantera, such as Roberto E., do not decorate houses but instead sculpt the stone. Roberto continues to live in Mexico, taking orders for sculptures from Mexican-Americans on the U.S. side of the border in Texas, or to tourists who have the means to transport the enormous works over the border. The sculpture gardens where he sells his work appear to be storefronts, but double as the carvers’ workshop. Roberto was trained by master sculptor Juan Florez, using a hammer and chisel to carve the stone in an attempt to create something that appears antique—as though it was excavated from the ground. Nodding to art and design history is not unique within any maker’s practice. However, what Florez and Roberto are doing is different: by giving the sculptures an ancient air, they acknowledge the buyers’ desire for historic or cultural authenticity within an artwork, even if the aura of authenticity is fabricated. This style of cantera carving, both in sculpture and in architecture, is not only about collapsing distance between homeland and host, but about making oneself visible in the context of migration and asserting oneself as belonging. Latinx migration is older than the state's boundaries, and the landscape is full of evidence of such placemaking practices. Beyond an aesthetic form of placemaking, the style also represents how these groups have faced violence and pain; it recognizes their strength, ingenuity, and character that knit people and places into a single garment.

The quarries, however, are where migrant knowledge of trade routes and movements of people are stored. Roberto and Tony source cantera from all over Mexico, as different regions produce different hues. In the quarry Lopez spoke about, sixteen pit

workers scaled twenty-meter high cliff walls. The workers are like rock whisperers, embodying knowledge of where to split rock, how to bring it in, and excavate it without breaking. We must turn our discussions of architecture history towards the *process* of building. If we erase the men in the quarries from Roberto and Tony's buildings, we erase the ecology of the buildings and the conditions in place to create such an aesthetic transformation in California and Texas.

These stories have implications for emerging architects, designers, and any practice where one selects materials to fabricate something. Lopez left us with these questions: Whom do we serve through our design? How do we come to understand the materials that formally and informally cross borders to arrive at our building sites? In telling alternative or obscured histories, we reject discourses that misrepresent migrants, Mexicans in particular, as careless, laboring bodies. Unpacking the history of buildings beyond the visual can help future architects, designers, and professional makers consider the broader ecologies of work, class, and race entangled within the gesture of material selection. In opening up the field of history to these forms of stories we can redefine places in the U.S. from temporary spaces for fugitive homes to secure staying grounds.

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