Interview with Teddy Cruz and Fonna Forman*

***Conducted and/or edited by the Volume Editors.**

Volume Editors: What do you think the Sustainable Development Goals hope to capture?

Fonna Forman: Obviously, the Sustainable Development Goals are attempting to tackle elements of the crisis that we're facing right now that the Millennium Development Goals before them didn't confront adequately, and which other global contracts before that also did not address adequately. So there's an idea that the Sustainable Development Goals have moved beyond the Millennium Development Goals with an overriding emphasis on environmental crisis. I think there's also increasing awareness that human well-being is tied to environmental well-being, linking the "cry of the earth" and the "cry of the poor". They're interconnected (these are Pope Francis's words, who we find ourselves suddenly very attracted to). So for us, embedded in our work is an essential connection between inequality—the disproportionate impacts of environmental crisis on vulnerable communities. Likewise we have a disproportionate responsibility not only because of disparate wealth and resources and access to mobilize resources to support those communities, but because in many cases the wealthy have caused many of these problems. The wealthiest 1 billion people on the planet are responsible for producing about 50% of greenhous gas emissions, while the poorest 3 billion, without access to affordable fossil fuesl, are responsible for about 5%. But it is this bottom 3 billion who suffer the greatest impacts, through floods, drought, agriculture failure, disease and forced migration. So for us, sustainability is inherently an idea of social justice. It's not a conventional sort of box-ticking exercise, which many global goals and national goals and local goals too easily become. For us sustainability is a deep commitment to mobilizing resources to help the most vulnerable adapt, right now, and to do everything we know is possible and necessary to ensure a low-carbon global economy for the future of all.

Teddy Cruz: We often say that in addressing new models of justice, or in engaging with social justice, we depend not only on the redistribution of resources, but also on the redistribution of knowledges. The meeting of different forms of knowledge to

produce more targeted strategies, I think, is part of the potential of new sustainability paradigms. These new moments, prompted by the role of nature itself, leading to an urgency and provocation for all of us researchers, practitioners and beyond, should help us move from the abstraction of those goals to the specificity of their implementation. This, in turn, requires procedural agendas. But first, it requires a very different mindset. That would get us to be more specific. Deepening social and economic inequality; urban informality; dramatic migratory shifts; climate change and the thickening of borders everywhere—ultimately, what we are talking about is a deficit in public thinking. So in addressing or entering into a new paradigm of sustainability, we need to move not only towards specificity, but also to a new form of political representation across institutions, to defend, uphold and elevate the primacy of civic and public thinking. That is the framework. Here in the United States when we talk about a 'Green New Deal', a lot of people focus on the 'Green' part of the equation, but a 'New Deal' means that we need to deal more robustly with issues of representation. With our votes, with our voices, and with our procedures.

FF: The role of global benchmarks like the SDGs (or the MDGs before them), do play a role, but the problem is in their articulation. They tend to be abstracted from the way things actually work in the world. They have a utopian quality to them and miss connections with the knowledge that's necessary to better understand them and implement them. [It is] as if an elite group of experts got together and decided what the world should do, and everything trickles down from there. Targets and indicators are important, don't get me wrong. We need them. But the challenges is how we arrive at them, and how they become generalizable knowledge that can be implemented. That part is currently very, very vague. There are many reasons why the Millennium Development Goals failed. One is clearly a disconnect between the articulation of the goal and the understanding in local contexts of what those goals mean for people in real situations. An example of such breakdown is often cited in development literature, in the late part of the last century; public health experts believed that if you could figure out how to bring sanitation to rural communities in Africa, for example, then you could also address the issue of airborne illness due to public defecation. So scientists had this bold idea that all we need to do is figure out how to airdrop latrines into villages, and the problem would be solved. The problem is that these very technical solutions that come from above don't address how people come to embrace new technologies and new strategies. The latrines became useful storage sheds, places to feed animals, everything but what they were intended to do. We need people who are able to mediate between top-down and bottom-up knowledges. For us, many of our strategies on the

ground are about trying to figure out how to connect our understanding of urgencies from the bottom, with these goals from the top. There is also the huge issue of human rights education. You may have an entire bundle of "universal human rights", but if those things don't mean anything to the young girl who is subject to their violation, then they're missing their mark.

TC: We need to move to specificity, especially to political specificity. One way in which this could happen is through what we call the "localization of the global". It may sound hugely naive, but for us it is an embedded practice that focuses on a very particular geography of conflict. The institutional mechanisms and actors need to be reorganized. The particularizing of the universal and the global is a political stance. Cities have become the laboratories for specific transformations; yet, our colleagues tell us that they are tired of listening to developers talking about sustainability and using sustainability as a camouflage to just expand and maintain the status quo or maximize profit. Developers are immediately absorbing the language of activists, environmentalist, and progressive-oriented minds, talking about walkability, talking about engaging with inequality. But, typically, that is just rhetorical language. What we really want to get to is the specificity of the process. What is the process you will be deciding on to engage the housing crisis, for example? For us, this been a detonator. If we are going to enter into the issue of the housing crisis, we know that our intervention cannot merely be that of designers of hopefully decent housing. We need to intervene in the economic performance, in the urban policy conditions that have prevented communities from building their own housing and being in control of their own productivity. We have to change the financialization process of housing, redistributing resources. In other words, we want to dismantle the institutional mechanisms that have perpetuated the problem. So the specific procedure around this needs to be intervened upon by architects, meaning that we cannot merely be the designers of buildings, but also the designers of political and economic processes. We need to be more specific about the policies that need to be challenged and changed in order to arrive at the materialization of that empty rhetorical language. Taking a political stance about that and figuring out how can we get more specific has been an integral part of our practice. We need to intervene in our own procedures, to intervene in our own practices. Through that, we can expand our own fields and contact the many domains that have remained peripheral.

FF: Not only that. There's a tendency among social scientists to see engaged work as unscientific. There's an anti-engagement bias within the social sciences. Some of my

colleagues see what I do as social work, which drives me crazy. As scientists we are not supposed to compromise the subject of inquiry, or try to change anything! That's why one of our tasks is to break down the barriers of our fields, and bring together what we see as the knowledges that are necessary to tackle these challenges in integral ways. One of the problems with with the SDGs is that they break things down into boxes and specialties, while the problems are multifaceted and complex. As educators, we have been to orienting out students to think beyond disciplinary boundaries so that they can work together across them. This is not something that comes naturally to people as they professionalize. In fact, all of the incentives within universities militate against interdisciplinarity. So what we're trying to do is assemble teams of students from public health, from design, from the social and natural sciences, medicine, etc., to work together on sustainability projects on the ground. This is really essential in moving forward.

VEs: Do you see a discrepancy between the actors that are involved in creating sustainable solutions, and the people to whom they are addressed?

FF: Much of the urban intelligence in cities is below the radar of people who formally define development and create policy. We've continually been inspired by the bottom-up resilience of communities that are navigating conditions of scarcity, and by the sustainability practices that they devise by necessity. They are required to mobilize whatever resources they can find and invest their own sweat in building and recycling materials through that process. Specifically, we are interested in the informal flows of materials that move back and forth across the US/Mexico border, which is a primary site of our work. We're interested in how buildings that are dismantled in San Diego find their way across the border into the informal settlements of Tijuana. There's a political economy of reuse that is extremely interesting. From the perspective of recycling and sustainability—tires, garage doors, etc.—we are fascinated in the way construction debris finds ways across the border. These practices are missing when you hear people discuss sustainability in terms of slum improvement, as if this is something that descends from above that will fix the problem of informal dwelling. Informal dwelling and peri-urban development is not going to decrease in the next decade, let alone the next century; it's going to expand. It's going to explode with migratory patterns and with climatic shifts. It's inevitable that peri-urban areas of cities are going to grow. That points to the need to recognize that these processes that are already in motion. One thing policy-makers can do is to figure out ways to actually scale these

processes up, rather than replace them with a flat-footed idea of slum improvement.

TC: There is an aspect of our practice that engages with the idea of translation, through the visualization of the invisible. Much of our work is based on an understanding of the impact of immigrants in transforming the American neighborhood, particularly because we live in a border condition where two cities really develop themselves in very, very different ways. In many neighborhoods in San Diego and in many cities around the world where immigrants transform the homogeneity and entrenched top-down logics, social and economic relations then diversify or pixelate with more complex social and economic conditions. This is something that is really incredible to witness. So how do we translate the value of that, and who carries that knowledge? Issues of political representation are therefore important to us. In our practice, we try to be the interface between the top-down and bottom-up. There are many people who just focus on the top-down or the bottom-up and maintain themselves isolated from institutions. We have noticed that we cannot leave institutions off the hook. They need to really be accountable. That's one major issue today—the renewed need for institutional accountability.

FF: We have so many colleagues who really invest all of their energies into helping the capacities of the bottom-up, thinking that the bottom up can go at it alone. One of the problems with this is that the bottom-up doesn't always understand the options that are available to them. And too often, developers come along and they sell urban recipes adorned with the language of sustainability. People then adopt these pathways because they believe that it's actually a way to improve and "beautify" their neighborhoods. We've taken a very different view, that the bottom-up needs top-down support, to avoid being manipulated by municipalities and their unscrupulous developer friends keen to gentrify. The bottom-up is resilient and powerful, but it benefits from new ideas; it needs the intelligence of the architect. In academic circles, this can be a very complicated issue, because it treads on the ethnographically sacred territory of community self-determination and autonomy and so forth, but autonomy and self-determination can be blinkered by the fetters of injustice, and sometimes the human character of existing conditions is not fully understood to communities that become inured to their conditions of poverty.

TC: The issue is that we have to break down this perennial public/private binary, or public/private paradigm that often only benefits the private while removing the resources of the many to the few, and that camouflages civicness with the barricading

of the public. It's essential that we begin to break apart certain models that have become ubiquitous in the language of sustainability and in the language of global bureaucratic models. We need to call for a new era of public engagement. We need to ask whether it is possible to return to a social democratic civic imagination, or whether we will surrender ourselves to private interests. It is important to add to this triad the checks and balances of community participation. Often, when we think of climate change, we say that climate action depends not only on new energy technology, or new sustainable buildings, but primarily on new forms of community engagement and in the shifting of norms and rethinking public opinion. Climate action also depends on new cross-sector synergies. An example that we're working on is what we call the UCSC community stations, which are public spaces located in immigrant neighborhoods where teaching and research is done collaboratively with community partners. We have been able to see that the economic and programmatic resources of the university can be a leverage for communities to develop their own housing in their own public spaces. We have discovered, with a group of friends in San Diego, that the sweat equity of the architect can become collateral for a construction loan. So nothing should prevent us from developing or producing housing by being ourselves the developers, or by prompting new synergies between university resources and community resources. We must create links in the circulation of knowledge and resources. In so doing, new alliances are formed. Such a 'coalition of knowledge' can then carry the public opinion to government and other subsidies, assembling these disparate relations into a new form of shared urban and community development that links fragmented resources. We need many more actors in this interface that really link these disparate and fragmented logics, policies, and budgets. We often say that the future of cities depends less on buildings, and more on the reorganization of social and economic relations. But this is a collaborative model that is very difficult to achieve. How do we link grassroots organizations with universities and governance? We need to to energize a new form of philanthropy. In the United States, philanthropy has now become a tax credit. We need new logics.

FF: The UCSD Community Stations that we have developed over the last decade are are an infrastructure for this kind of community engagement and partnership here at the border between San Diego and Tijuana. They are a network of field stations located in four underserved neighbourhoods on both sides of the borderwall, where university researchers and community partners do advocacy and urban development together.

VEs: As a social scientists, architect/urbanists, and also as educators, what political tools do you see emerging alongside the SDGs?

FF: Well, here in the US, we're dealing with a large segment of the population that's entirely resistant to the idea of climatic change, completely manipulated by right-wing and corporate agendas. 30 to 40% of the population is absolutely resistant to the idea of climate change and climate policy associated with it, concentrated in so-called "red states". So there are important questions of broader public support for policies that are going to be essential to move forward in the next stage. I am Vice-Chair of a major research and educational initiative at the University of California called Bending the Curve, essentially the mobilization of a set of climate solutions that have been successful in California, and can be scaled to the US and the world. We are committed to the ideas that technology is only a part of the answer. Policy is only part of the answer. What's fundamental is a major shift in attitudes and behaviors, before anything else can work. One thing that we're noticing is that communication about climate change always works better when it's localized. Mass communication campaigns cannot work, as if we are advertising Coca-Cola. We need to help people understand that the transformation of the environment is actually going to have an impact on their own city, on their own block, on their own family, on their own health, and on their own heartbeat. When impacts are personalized, suddenly attitudes begin to change. There was a focus group study done recently on the political views of residents of low-lying coastal areas of southern Florida, which is known as a very politically complex place. Even conservative voters began to shift their attitudes on climate change when they understood that their block is susceptible to rising sea levels, when they saw visualizations of what that would look like. So sadly, inevitably, as certain areas of the US and around the world begin to face the impacts of a changing climate, floods, wildfires, drought, sea level rise, their views are going to change. This is going to happen slowly but surely. We therefore need to be thinking about how to retool our frame from—and I hate to say it—ethical to interested-based strategies. One place in which that's already working is in the public health community. It is already clear that the changing climate is not only going to impact the poor—it is going to impact all of us. Cardiovascular disease, respiratory disease, airborne illnesses—these will affect populations that are presently less vulnerable, populations that are not part of the bottom three billion, and inevitably, that's going to change people's views. We see that people who are not receptive to the idea of social justice sui generis are not going to be convinced that climate change is urgent because it affects the poor. The introduction of poverty

as a part of the more generalized language about climate change and sustainability is not going to move the needle. That seems to be what the social science is telling us. Another issue is that sustainability often gets imbricated with other views that are associated with left-leaning politics. So in our country, for example, abortion, gun control, regulatory issues—they're all imbricated with one another. Social scientists who are committed to climate change and sustainability are trying to find ways to disambiguate these issues, to disentangle them so that we can speak about sustainability and climate in a depoliticized way. It's very hard to do, obviously, because of the private interests entangled in this issue.

TC: In what way can we present new evidence? This is tricky because at the moment we have so much information and evidence, yet we are so far from the truth. There's so much doubt in the value of public thinking that, now more than ever, we need to intervene or produce resources to enact what we would call a new form of urban pedagogy to really change hearts and minds. How do we begin to move the needle? We might have to move away from the imposition of ethical, normative notions that would inspire people to change. Instead, we must bring in a new era of commitment to interdependence. Something we have been committed to at the US–Mexico border—a very contested geography—is to declare such border regions as laboratories to seek new strategies of coexistence and interdependence. To prove that border walls, in this case, are self-inflicted wounds. That they are not only protecting us from the unwanted 'other', but are inflicting damage on our urban ecologies, etc. How can we enable new forms of visualization that can enable, clearly, [understanding of] how these policies are damaging to ourselves? This is a tragedy: we are voting against our own interests, and seemingly because of our emotional ideological stance, we don't know it. So this is about education, but a different kind of education—a critical and more radical pedagogy. We've developed the UCSD Community Stations to co-producing new knowledge, and have dedicated our programmatic agenda primarily to children. Children are the cross-border citizens of tomorrow. Empathy, coexistence, interdependence are political tools. More than global benchmarks, we need specific experimental projects on the ground, to move beyond words and beautiful conceptual framing, to really support models that can elevate the capacity of already existing projects and desires on the ground, across geographies. For example, in our case, we're trying to advance the development of a cross-border commons, linking a slum of 85,000 people that is crashing against the border wall on the Mexican side, with a protected estuary on the US side—the lungs of the region. In very few places in the world can we find ecologies like this: poverty,

informality, militarization and environmentalism entangled together. With a group of stakeholders—community, grassroots organizations, governments and universities on both sides of the border—we are forming a coalition to produce a cross-border land conservancy. To protect some of the still-remaining open lands in the slum, to program the environment to prevent much of the slum's trash and sediment from polluting into the estuary. In other words, it is a project that transcends the wall itself, through methods of cross-border institutional collaboration. This, in turn, would be fertile ground for new forms of representation and support to elevate these areas. We need to promote a new era of identifying hot-spots where these conglomerations of progressive thinking have already been cooking potential projects.

FF: There needs to be more correspondence between policy-makers and people who are actually hitting ground. That's true when you're talking about the global benchmarks and the way they're interpreted locally and the way they manifest locally. We need people who are skilled and actually navigating between both. Oftentimes, people who work on the ground stay on the ground, whereas the others who work in rarefied spaces where the oxygen is thin and who write the mandates for the world are often not practitioners at all, and have no access to learn from practitioner knowledge. We need mediators. I tried in a small way to play this role on the Global Citizenship Commission several years ago, a body summoned by Former UK Prime Minister Gordon Brown for the purpose of evaluating the Universal Declaration of Human Rights for the 21st century. While we had the noble task of aligning shifting global mandates with ethical commitments; I tried to bring a grounded sensibility to the endeavour, and to reflect on how people ultimate understand, embrace and act upon global benchmarks. I was particularly keen to emphasize the role that participatory human rights education (HRE) must play if we want global goals to be meaningful in local places.

TC: I once got into an argument with Richard Sennett at a symposium in which I argued that in order to get more concrete about sustainability, we need to produce neighborhood-based organizations, so that marginalized neighborhoods and cities can be the become places intervention and experimentation. But he saw this as abandoning the city. Yet, if Bloomberg would've invested in the other boroughs as much as in Manhattan, it would be a very different paradigm. In other words, we have witnessed this polarization of city versus neighbourhood versus state, etc. In terms of new actors, I think somebody has to begin to recalibrate the relationship between such scales—global, federal, state, city and neighborhood—which is always

very difficult. These goals also need to be accompanied by a more radical glossary of what we call a 'new political language'. For example, if we talk about density, we feel that it is sometimes understood in a very myopic way, simply referring to an amount of buildings per area. Challenging these concepts is an important paradigm for work. Density cannot be perpetuated as an abstract measurement of an amount of people per area or buildings per area. In our research, we conceive of density in these immigrant neighbourhoods (also provoking institutions to do the same) as an amount of social exchanges per area. This is obviously a difficult thing to imagine, but by expanding the notion of mixed use by synergizing other forms of funding or support, this could be possible. For example, at one of our community stations, with thin and infrastructural programmatic support, we saw that mixed-use buildings were oriented towards cultural and educational programming co-produced between residents, university researchers, and the non-profit organization we're working with. We also need to produce a new glossary of more operative terms.

FF: Sustainability thinking requires openness to an evolving future with an understanding that things aren't static. The migratory shifts that are predicted for the coming decades are mind-boggling. And cities are going to need to learn how to adapt and absorb populations. We are witnessing this at the US border this very moment, migrants from Central America are being stopped at the border and denied a just asylum process in the United States. We tend to think of these as political refugees or refugees escaping violence. And they are. But is important to note as well that they are also climate refugees. Agriculture has become unstable in much of Central America. A recent study found that 70% of these migrants are agricultural workers, and that agricultural instability played a major role in their decision to walk north. The US is closing its doors to them, ripping their children from their arms, and detaining them in camps. This is happening 20 miles from our campus. Sustainability means first of all figuring out how to ethically respond to and welcome these new populations into our communities, regardless of the political walls that divide us from them. We need to figure out how to house and integrate these populations that are coming north. This is one reason we have been focusing so much energy developing emergency housing in Tijuana, as a radical gesture of commitment by the public university in San Diego.

TC: Sustainability, in this case, must be a tool to create new forms of inclusion. Inclusion, in this case, is not just to host the immigrant, but more broadly, it is about developing strategies to truly incorporate disparate groups into society. How can

we design these spaces of inclusion? We are taught as architects how to design things, but we are never taught how design protocols by which we can make those sustainable.

FF: We're not interested in maximizing space for the housing elements of the projects; we're purposefully designing areas where migrants can engage in social, cultural and economic activity. The non-profit that we've partnered with in Tijuana had a plot of land, and as Haitian migrants began to arrive in Tijuana over the last years, the non-profit dedicated that land to building emergency warehousing space to shelter them. So hundreds of Haitians arrived, and they pitched tents in these warehouses. Many had technical and architectural skills and began to build additional housing units on the site. We've been helping to scale this process up, negotiate subsidies with local factories to use material systems to stabilize the housing. We are committed to helping the non-profit transform this from a migrant shelter to a full-on sanctuary neighborhood where migrants are involved in the economic and social life of the community.

TC: Sustainability for us means to transform environments from logics of consumption to logics of productivity. Immigrant neighborhoods are already inherently places of social, cultural and economic production. How do we configure housing that surround and are activated by new forms of participation in the built environment? In Tijuana, we're working with factories to transform their shelving systems into infrastructures for housing. We are producing a scaffold as our first phase for the project and we have funding to create a factory with the activists and immigrants, so that they can co-own what effectively is a construction shop, so that they can build not only the rest of the housing (which they already are doing in a more informal way) and also remain with the economic foundation to do other jobs across the slum. So it is about this incremental, layered project. Similar projects exist, but they still just talk about units of housing, rather than about constructing communities, or producing economic models, or potential new interfaces between housing and public space.

TC: Finally, in thinking more critically about sustainability, proposing to move from logics of consumption to logics of productivity in terms of organizing the city and beyond, we have to come to terms with the dissatisfaction that exists across the world, as many rural communities and hinterlands (the Midwest and the US, for example). The move from manufacturing and industry to a service economy has led to the dismantling of centers of productivity. Obviously, new political approaches must be re-injected into those environments. Not in the form of the same industries, but maybe as new infrastructures and new industries of productivity based on green, renewable energy, etc. This means that our target should also be generating new forms of job production. That's why, when we talk about incorporating immigrants, it is not just about giving them shelter, but about supplying infrastructures to provide the needs of productivity so that they can begin to manage their own resources.