Informal Urbanism, city building processes and design responsibility

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City Building Processes |
Design Responsibility |
Informal Urbanism |

In the face of multiple, complex and contradictory urban phenomena, and the impossibility to define one kind of city/one urbanism, the present short contribution aims to reposition informal urbanism as one of the many existing legitimate processes that are contributing to city building. Over 1 billion people now live in 'slums' or 'informal settlements', a number expected to double by 2030, making what can be labelled 'informal urbanism' globally into the dominant expression of urban form. In our view, architects should formulate appropriate answers in the form of a responsive architecture, an architecture of engagement that has the capacity to reconsider and recalibrate design process within this contemporary urban condition, which could be called 'un-designed' or even 'un-designable'. The text uses two vignettes of projects that greatly contributed to the legitimisation of informality as urbanism. The first, Favela-Bairro programme in Rio de Janeiro (1994-2006), and the second, PREVI plan in Lima (1965-75). They entertain a reverse relation with informality. The first aims at formalising the informal, while the second at 'informalising' the formal. The PREVI, although conceived as a formal plan, is not detached from the overall logic of informal urbanism; it rather opens a dialogue between self-organisation and architectural discourse. Although different, both narratives embraced informality as a sine qua non condition to work with and learn from.

The impossibility of the city

Massimo Cacciari once argued that "the city does not exist, what exists are different and distinct forms of urban lives" (2004 p.4), suggesting that one single city is impossible. The city is in a continuous mutation, reassembly, change and transformation, but it exists just because it is inhabited, perceived and lived: its consistency is the plot of the different desires, ambitions, hopes and projects it is able to arouse. If the city is not unique, the knowledge of contemporary urbanisms is not homogeneous as well, and thus no single universalist claims on urban epistemology is possible, as it

does appear to emerge from a complex interaction between "cultural structures, social values, individual and collective actions and observations of the material arrangements" (Hou et all 2015, p.3) or more simply it is made by the multiple, intense and relational forces that co-produce the city.

Such multiple, intense and relational production of the contemporary urban conditions creates the impossibility of a unitary vision, form, definition, design and image of a city. To navigate this, urbanism faces a seemingly contradictory task. On the one hand, the need to remain vigilant and to wage war on totality, that is, to critique and subvert any and all established systems of categories that span from the very being of the city (Mcfarlane 2010; Wachsmuth 2014; Scott & Storper 2014), or the multiplicity of urbanisms (Merrifield 2013; Brenner 2014) across the different fields of urban theory (Robinson 2014; Parnell and Oldfield 2014; Peck 2015). On the other hand they need to, as Lyotard (1979/1984, p.82) says, "save the honor of the name", that is, preserve the power of language to reveal and make sense of our world and our lives. But how do we do both? How can we question and criticize the constant classification of cities and urban material conditions, ontological objects and subsume them within specific categories, and on the other side, recognize and respect language's capacity to name, classify, and assess real-world in-situ experiences and singular assemblages? And how can we then recognize the existence of a multiplicity of urbanisms assuming their *de facto* contested nature? Specifically it does seem important to acknowledge that in order to move towards a deeper contextual understanding of contemporary urbanism, we must continue to move beyond the global or world city discourse; the oversimplified term offering an authorized image of city's success that misleadingly ascribes characteristics of parts of cities to the whole (Robinson 2006).

> *" I see the informal as a functional set of urban operations that allow the transgression of imposed political boundaries and top down economic models. I see the informal not as a noun but as a verb, which detonates traditional notions of site specificity and context into a more complex system of hidden socio-economic exchanges (...)".* (Cruz 2010, p.30)

Roy (2011) advocates for understanding informality as a generalized mode of metropolitan urbanization of low, middle, and high-income households. However, she warns that some expressions of space production are criminalized (i.e. subaltern informalities) while other is legitimized (i.e. elite informalities). For her, informality is conceived as a "heuristic device that undercovers the ever-shifting urban relationship between the legal and illegal, legitimate and illegitimate, authorized and unauthorized" (Roy 2011, p.233). Under this lens, informality is a relational strategy of political bargaining involved in the contested boundaries between 'formal' and 'informal' spheres. Recent explanations about informality debunk versions of informality as heroic conquests of the subaltern or the apocalyptic view of marginalization and despair (Varley 2010). Instead, informality becomes a feature of power

structures and a purposive mode of regulation (Hossain 2010).

Urban informality is bound to cover a range of situations in which building stock, design, layout occupations and aesthetic violate some sort of normative and regulatory frame. Such violations however are both enabling and generative. This is especially apparent in economic terms, as often they constitute the fertile territory of central and competitive locations with access to income generating opportunities and favorable capitals and networks accesses. Such privileged and historically consolidated trajectories of development have been often recognized and labeled by governments as territories occupied, developing in violation of the dominant norms, forms and regulations (Boano 2014). In this sense, informality become both a mode of production as well as a territorial logic produced by external forces, that demonstrate a linkage between an end state, a contingent spatial situation and power apparatuses that create the conditions for such inevitable appearance in cities.

The way in which informality has been perceived, narrated, and addressed has substantially changed over time, being in turn criminalised, neglected, ignored, accepted, celebrated and ultimately romanticised, by the mutual influence of urban policies and international architectural discourses. For long time informality has been associated with dystopian living conditions, and relegated outside the territory of interest of architects, urbanists and policy makers. Government approaches until the half of the last century were ranging from amnesia - neglecting the problem, or brutal removal - demolition and evictions of informal settlements. Unsurprisingly the removal of such settlements, simply produced the creation of new larger informal settlements elsewhere, contributing to the radicalisation and normalisation of the phenomena.

Along with the raise of the ordinary and the democratisation of space, urban informality has been increasingly presented as a way - 'just another way'- of building cities. The paradigmatic shift towards informal production of cities is largely indebted to the work of whom in the 1960s highlighted the level of freedom and the emancipatory value of self organisation and self building. Namely John Turner (1971) uncovered the effectiveness of self organisation practices in the peri-urban *barriadas* of Lima and the extensive range of tactics and innovations that urban poor had to offer. Informality started to be seen as a site of potentiality to learn from, rather than a mere problem to solve. This triggered a general consensus around the 'slum issue' that eventually led to a whole range of initiatives, programmes and urban policies addressing informality in a different way. Favela-Bairro in Rio de Janeiro (1994-2006) was amongst the first programmes to address slum upgrading at city level, capitalising on the general consensus and the know-how developed in previous initiatives.

The 1900s urban renewal under the Pereira Passos administration was aimed at transforming Rio de Janeiro into a western capital city. This implied the

demolition of vast urban areas. In the lack of social housing policy to re-house the evicted population, many found refuge in the hills (*morros*), which extreme topography and steep condition had so far prevented from formal urbanisation. The central though hidden location of the 'proto-favelas' attracted a growing number of migrants from poor rural areas. Soon the informal occupation of *morros* saturated the available land and new larger favelas were formed in the peri-urban areas. Informality was at that point deeply embedded in the process of urban production. Social movements (*mutirões*) born in the 1980s coagulated a general consensus around the 'favela issue' and soon led to new policy and programmes toward informality. Amongst them, the Favela-Bairro (slum to neighbourhood) which objectives were: (a) the urbanisation of favelas (the infrastructural integration of existing informal areas into the formal city); (b) their regularisation (the incorporation into current legislation), and (c) the upgrading through urban acupuncture. Design played a crucial, although controversial role in the latter.

> *"The programme also demonstrates a very strong (albeit incomplete) multisectoral approach at the project level, and is especially interesting in the emphasis it places on architecture and public space as mechanisms to bring about social and physical integration, with integration of the informal and the formal at the city level being its most ambitious objective. Thus it can be concluded that Favela Bairro does constitute a new approach to poverty alleviation in Rio, and although the programme.'s considerable resources are not targeted at the most vulnerable, they instead focus upon the collective needs of a sizeable proportion of Rio.'s population. In addition, Favela Bairro applies a broad and multidimensional understanding of poverty, which is addressed at the city scale through a multisectoral approach"* (Fiori, Riley & Ramirez 2000, p.134)

Overall the programme had a too strong rhetoric over the formalisation of informal areas borrowing logics and values of the formal city; nonetheless it remains the first context driven programme, that strongly encouraged the preservation of local spatial, cultural and economic values. *"(..) rather than seeing the informal as sector, or as segments of cities, they regarded it as constitutive of the urban condition itself. Urban informality is inexorably interwoven with the city as whole - at all scales and levels - and has to be seen as another way of being in the city and constructing it"* (Fiori & Brandao 2010)

Starting from the early 2000s, the programme witnessed a slow erosion due to fragmentation of the political support, loss of credibility and increasing skepticism due to delays in the implementation, rigidity of the programme, lack of resources, bad quality of construction material, lack of maintainance, and lack of participation on the ground. Soon the general attention turned to social housing programmes and new housing construction (Becerril 2015).

In the midst of the turn of the century change of perspective, informality emerged also as a form of transgression, contestation and resistance to the

dominant mode of production of the city, neoliberal policy and capitalist driven development. Such conceptualisation persists, along with increasing concerns towards its counter effects. The risk entailed in the celebration of the anti-authoritarism and liberation intrinsic to informality is the acceptance of scarcity and precariousness as non modifiable condition; the legitimisation of poverty and violence; and the consequent perpetuation of structures of exclusion and exploitation (Van Ballegooijen & Rocco 2013). This might be one of the reasons for the erosion of the Favela-Bairro programme in Rio.

The change of perspective embodied as well a critique of modern architecture and a revival of the vernacular. The PREVI plan in Lima (1965-75) was amongst the first projects that challenged modern master-planning while embracing informal growth as essential part of design. Developed to address the increasing growth of *barriadas* in the periphery of the city, PREVI was a low rise high density plan. At its core, was the idea of incremental housing. Instead of setting a living standard, the houses were conceived to gradually grow over time according to family needs and financial conditions. With the word of the time, PREVI was a 'platform for change', accommodating appropriation and personalisation. Via incorporating the principle of incremental and informal growth into design, PREVI dismantled the machine we know as architecture, and especially modern architecture and its self-determinism.

After its completion, the PREVI looked like a modern, white, mostly one-storey satellite town. The growth pattern was defined by the plan, and ultimately disregarded. Forty years later, it forms part of an overcrowded suburb, incorporated into the endless fabric of the city. The PREVI's unique combination between a formal master plan and informal housing, and between state-led intervention and individual action, marked a route to follow in contemporary approaches to housing; though, it remained an isolated case, it was never incorporated into policies, and its principles forgotten (García-Huidobro,Torres Torriti &Tugas 2011; Kahatt 2011, Salas & Lucas 2012).

Wordling: Informal urbanism as history of the present?
Anania Roy (2011) has proposed the concept of worlding, a term that seeks to recover and restore the vast array of global strategies of urban development and the production of urban space and models of urbanism that include those previously marginal in the production of urban research and theory. Robinson (2006, p.126) instead, advocates the need to understand cities as ordinary rather than other and to develop "creative ways of thinking about connections across the diversity and complexity of economies and city life". A renewed anti essentialist shift in architecture and urbanism practice is welcome as is "shaking up old explanatory hierarchies and pushing aside stale concepts […] are making space for a much richer plurality of voices, in a way that some have likened to a democratization of urban theory. Informality and informal urbanism then should have a fundamental critical place in such endeavour. The present messy urban reality, away from the glossy architectural paper, call for another type of architect, one who is, as Jeremy Till suggests, 'bound to the earth but with the vision, environmental sense,

and ethical imagination to project new (social) spatial futures on behalf of others' and where informal urbanism can serve to:

- reflect on the ways in which informality is currently represented, in architectural discourse and urban policy, beyond the pornography of informality and the aestheticisation of poverty, towards a critical engagement with everyday life;
-reflect on informal urbanism as a critique to the neoliberal mode of production of the city, with attention to the multiple forms of governance, epistemological and disciplinary discourse/narratives;
-rethink informal urbanism not as an exceptional condition, the 'anti-city' or the 'other city' but rather as a *generalized mode of metropolitan urbanization*, and therefore consider informality as a possibility to extend the limits of what and how we investigate the urban (beyond binary oppositions);
-reflect on informal urbanism not as a the ultimate frontier of spatial experimentation in architecture, following the socially- conscious-neo-avant-garde, but rather as a set of conditions that offers its own solutions and a site of possibility; get rid of any vision of informality as 'site of invention' for creative minds, and think of informality as 'site of finding' of people solutions and technology instead;
- deal with informality as a constituent material of the everyday urban, without romanticizing "the encroachment of the ordinary" nor conceptualizing informality as an aesthetic of slums. Approach it instead as "possibility space" where space is both a source of oppression and of liberation. Do not fixate on elements, images and forms, but on their processes, their potentialities.

Recognizing that there are a myriad of relationships between the built environment and how it structures and is structured by social life, understanding this multiplicity of urbanisms reinforces the need to also understand the political, economic and social dynamics at play within the urban fabric when acting in the urban realm across time and space. The compositional, messy, uncontrollable and the recombinant nature of the present urbanism, and the differential knowledge at play in the construction of the urban as object and subject is anything but straightforward. Rather it is energized and constructed in a continue process of creation, legitimization and contestation.

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**"Epifanie
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