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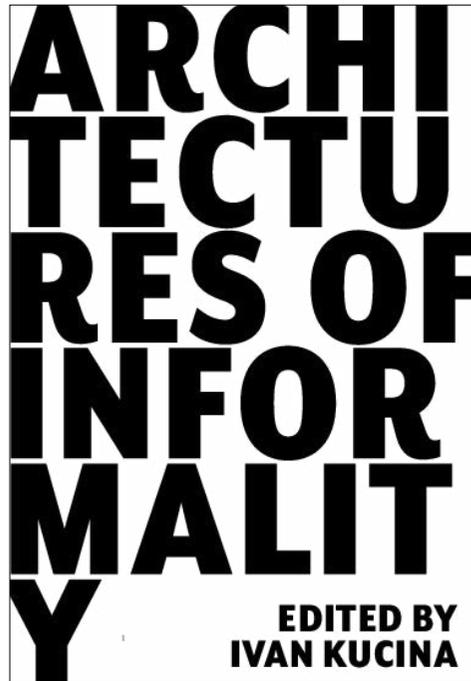
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## ARCHITECTURES OF INFORMALITY



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The book, written by students from the Dessau International Architecture Graduate School, is a compilation of five contextual topics regarding informal architecture. This book might lack scholarship of academic expertise, as confessed by Prof. Ivan Kucina, but it offers interesting reading for those with a passion for new and unconventional architectural ideas.

In the first chapter, *When cities are out of control*, it is stated that one third of the world's urban population, the poorest, has adopted informality, due to poverty and housing scarcity. Informal housing is the dweller's largest asset. But it is under permanent threat of demolition, as authorities opine that it is risky if slums are retained over the course of time. Capitalist hegemony and globalisation might have freed people and business, but they have also failed to improve the unemployment situation of the urban poor. Due to political manipulation and ineffective public administration, this group of people is marginalised, not by choice, but rather they are the victims of a harsh reality where workers work and dwell in worse environments as products of dysfunctional political systems in which corrupt politicians utilise or even patronise them. Being socially excluded, such settlements are responsive to the constant needs of inhabitants. This group of people shows innovation, recycling and sustainability in picked materials, although their access to resources is limited. Their materials produce less collective emissions of carbon. Acute unemployment in cities proved that informality is flexible – it asks for nothing, but allows almost anything. The first example is the Kowloon walled district of Hong Kong, where the inhabitants made power stations for electricity and allowed private suppliers to pump water from wells. On the other hand, rigid regulations of formal architecture have been challenged, as they segregate and limit actions. These laws were written years ago, and contemporary cities have changed a great deal since then. Industrialisation ignited rapid urbanisation, and formality cannot function, as it is a bottleneck of bureaucracy. Management of formal zoning for exclusive areas does not provide options for social mixing. But the inclusive informal development consists of blurred boundaries between settlements. It brought 'incremental building' ideas where any house can be built over a period of time in different stages, in order to achieve formal protocol in the future. Formality and informality could thus be mixed as part of the socio-economic fabric of cities where actors will interact as part of a whole.

The second chapter, *Self-organized building affairs*, starts with an example from Mumbai, India, where 60% of the total informal settlements are illegal slums. These are the most extreme conditions of informality, developed on waste-dumping land, with unhygienic and bad governance. Such settlements host various economic backgrounds and developed poverty as a culture of the helpless outsiders. Night restaurants for day labourers are effective economic and recreational spaces for such areas. For example, Dharavi is an economically successful slum, because it has thousands of

home-based, low-tech, labour-intensive and recycling businesses such as textile, pottery, leather, and so on. A great example of urban redevelopment that brings out the total emotions of society is that dwellers are eager to live closer to one another. Informality is not a product, but rather a process for both individual and collective needs. There is an example of a chew jetty in Pinang, Malaysia, where a Chinatown of early Chinese fishermen immigrants provided waterfront housing developments. A British colonial character formed its 'degree of formality', but the religious purpose of Buddhist shrines overtook traffic rules to transform this town as a heritage-based economy. Police bribery is the informal economy of night markets, while a profit-making and formal tourist economy already exist. Informal economy evolved from the 'emergence' of human nature. An exact reflection of Robert Neuvirth's system D means the self-reliance of such a parallel economy. It will be the second largest economy of the world within the next 50 years. Another example is Gropius Törten estate in Dessau, Germany, where the famous Bauhaus style is being misused for the informal attitude of inhabitants. Surely, informality is a reaction to the failure of formality, which is not only a problem for the third world, but also evident in developed countries. Thus, architects need to be ready for the next era. Informality develops practical solutions with flexibility, pragmatism, negotiation, continuous adaptation, and the struggle for survival. Naturally chosen leaders of the community and their agents frequently cope with collective and territorial interests in a self-organised and interdependent community. All together, they comprise a network of semi-autonomous agents. This again follows laws, codes, regulations and incentives of formality, to some extent. In this instance, design is part of that self-organised system that triggers unpredictable complex dynamics to make our cities vibrant.

The third chapter, *Bonds between formal and informal*, states that formal architecture is all about façade to win market competition, while informal architecture pushed us outside the conventional horizon. It filled up the homogeneous void left by formal architecture such as static geometrical objects or parasites. Basic construction techniques, innovative building typology, available materials, survival strategy in the informal economy, and the primal growth of instruments all challenge the authorised services of the city government. It raised questions to shift our intention from a top-down mechanism to a bottom-up action, with conflict and negotiation. Such processes will compel architects to create a base for participatory and simultaneous transformation. These settlements are radically democratic and politically responsive; mass dominates over code; relationship prevails over composition, and adaptation is more important than statics. In every case, informality appears first in organic development, followed by formality with boundary and territorial sense. Formality and informality cannot substitute each other, but they can overlap. Formality is less

adaptive, while informality is corrupted. Foucault saw architecture as a diagram (Cartography) that is again limited to the mechanism of power and boundary lines. It is a blind and mute machine, but it makes others see and speak. The Chilean architect Alejandro Aravena took the concept. He had no fear of having no control over final aesthetics, but his concern is the position of void and observing the works around it for the time being. Moreover, it reduced the cost of his project and the personalisation of each unit could cope with the changing demands. Informality is thus effective for heterogeneous urban populations controlled by landlords in a sustainable urban ecology. Increasing or decreasing formality does not affect society. The concept of urban commons has great potential to ensure collective ownership of resources through informal housing models, especially in third-world countries. Current urban development policies segregate citizens and patronise the monopoly of commodification, a wrong practice indeed.

The fourth chapter, *Quest for the fair city agenda*, discusses the failure of Chandigarh. It lacks unintentional interaction of its inhabitants, although its gridiron pattern is still beneficial. The walkways, corridors and verandas of an old city such as Varanasi offer visual treats and intimacy. The whole streetscape is, in fact, a germination of public spaces full of collective memory, socialisation and educative interventions for the next generation. Informality can bring equilibrium within a formal context and its façade can add rich fabric to the urban narrative. Another example from Caracas shows how, by the dint of community participation, a football stadium was transformed into a four-storey gymnasium. This introduced a network of pedestrian walkways converted into stairs equipped with utilities, and the landings were designed for social interaction. A participatory policy of NGOs and volunteering agencies to ensure basic services, improvement of living environment, and land-tenure security is gaining popularity in the third world. For the past 30 years, community participation was part of urban management, but this effort did not influence the decision-making process to a great extent.

Previously, it was a tool, but if it were used as a process, it might be able to enhance their contribution, because a tool is subjective, whereas a process is constructive. The word 'community' is also wrong, as it identifies any group as a homogeneous entity bound by natural, social and administrative barriers and generalises all categories such as women, the poor, and so on under one canopy. Informal architecture will primarily be a habitat trend, the focal voice of human beings in the next couple of decades. Equality and sustainability will be the challenge. There will be several overlapping forces such as rapid urbanisation, wrong policies, financial rigidity, and unrealistic regulations. Secure tenure-based practice could be replaced by comprehensive mixed use moulded by legal pluralism. An interesting example is that of Ogun region in Nigeria, where inhabitants provided documents of their dwellings and

the authority redesigned these later with legal infrastructures and services. This might take land from government, but, in return, it generates revenue. Provision of accessibility and public space can be standardised in informal settlements in four steps: goal-setting, action plan, community participation for capacity-building, and accountability process. Soft and micro-credit loans might have a long-term impact on the community. Outdated plans should go through different transformation stages, in order to check further informal growth. Issues such as setbacks, road width, and so on could be negotiated.

The chapter *What can architects do?* first analyses, during the massive migration era of the 1960s, how the idea of the global south changed conventional architecture. Its small-scale intervention and on-site building ability proved to be more efficient. Teddy Cruz admired it as a better recycling process in a conflicting environment such as the US-Mexico border, while Oscar Lewis described it as a cancer, manifested in tension, but resulting in overall urban form. In this instance, the fragmentation of cities reflects the fragmentation of budget and agencies. For example, in Caracas, the urban think tank of Universidad Simón Bolívar under their Mirco Utopias concept: not to solve problems, but to pose new problems to influence diversified forces. It is a laboratory of low-cost cases, compost toilets, new routes and public spaces into existing fabric to transform streets into spaces of dialogue, even accommodate commerce and livestock. The seating hubs of informal public spaces could be implemented in formal development. Such adaptive reuse is, in fact, an expansion of informality. Architects such as Lucien Kroll found that mono-functional units of informality remain unused, whereas Ottokar Uhl is concerned about the lifespan of structures. Space optimisation is another good quality of informality. Architect Gary Chang transformed a tiny 344 square feet apartment with integrated furniture that can move over 24 different layouts. According to Charles Stokes, informal patterns developed as social foundations rather than physical bases. Architects can thus design simple, low-cost and handicraft based economically on sound prototypes. A final example is the Karail slum in Dhaka, Bangladesh, where architect Hasibul Kabir created a public gathering space, a playground for children, and a gardening area. He named it Ashar Mancha or 'platform of hope'. He successfully educated the inhabitants about pollution, sanitation, ventilation and lighting that changed the mindset of other slums and had a great impact on the total cityscape.

For all the above topics, architecture schools worldwide can now include informal architecture in their academic courses rather than overlooking it.