

Informal Formality

Michael Sorkin

Professor of Architecture and Director of the Graduate Program in Urban Design at The City College of New York (CCNY), USA

There is a school of thought that suggests that informal settlements don't actually exist. Not, of course, in the sense that vast territories in Lima, Cairo, and Mumbai aren't visible and coherent but in the idea that their practices are not discontinuous with the cultures in which they are embedded, that the utility of a Manichean distinction between formal and informal sectors is increasingly unproductive, a clear line between the realms impossible. This is both because the formal culture deploys a variety of informal means in its own development – Ananya Roy identifies the nominally formal planning regime in India as almost entirely the outcome of fundamentally informal strategies – and because nobody living in an informal settlement can exist entirely outside the routines of formality, indeed that their lives hybridize a wide variety of economic strategies and relations: a resident might work in the formal sector by day, return to housing in the informal, conduct commercial activity in a combination of both, and hold an informal second job. This porosity is also characteristic of the continuous transformation of so-called informal settlements by various schemes for upgrading, some formalized from the “top” others self-initiated from the “bottom”.

For sympathetic observers, informal settlements are venerated for their spontaneity, for the intricacy of their social networks, for their capacity for economic and architectural improvisation, for the drastic economy of their sustainable characteristics, and for their ability to eke out benefit at the margins of the formal economy. While the nature of the idea of informality is the subject of intense debate – in the work of scholars including Roy, Janice Perlman, Asef Bayat, James Holston, and others – that seeks to situate its styles of regulation, its legal status, and its social meaning within the larger circumstances and practices of settlement in places like Brazil or India, the functional and architectural character of “informal” communities is, despite being constantly contested, somewhat more conceptually transparent and a potential source of speculation – and inspiration – for building more generally.

Of course, as these observers have pointed out, there is considerable risk in detaching the formal qualities of these settlements from their profound social, political, and economic complexities, in particular, from the on-going debate about the proletarianization of their inhabitants and the ways in which they've been caught up in the routines of neo-liberalism and the globalization of capital. In particular, there is a particular danger in the “aestheticization” of these places in what Roy has suggested is a version of pastoral nostalgia and in an impetus to judge them in terms of their relationship to mythologies of rationality that have shaped the discourse of the “modern” city. In tandem, these views have led to a variety of often well-intended efforts at “upgrade” that are simply palliative, that neglect the complex of non-architectural determinants of their form and life, and that participate in their assimilation to dominant routines of property, sociability, and exchange, effectively shifting the burden of survival to the poor via the one-dimensional celebration of their “entrepreneurialism”.

Nevertheless, there seem to be cogent arguments for the conceptual and activist utility of insisting both that the informality is both an illusory condition and a useful one. Clearly, the phenomenon of the “squatter settlement”, those places which combine poverty, a preponderance of minimally built housing, big deficits of infrastructure and other services, high rates of non-wage economic activity, lack of social mobility, and a very mixed picture of formal ownership and tenure, is something that easy to recognize *on the ground* from Mumbai to Karachi to Jakarta to Rio. While these places might be characterized as slums they invert the typical pattern of development one finds in the poor neighborhoods of Brooklyn, Detroit, or South Central Los Angeles in which the trajectory is one of the progressive deterioration of market produced stocks of housing versus an appropriating movement from zero in the direction of a more rationalized environment. We value informality precisely for its resistance in creativity and its potential to interrogate the undergirding assumptions of the modern city, to collapse the artificial distinction that relegates the informal to a status reduced to a frustrated and unfulfilled, even impossible, aspiration to modernity.

From the architectural perspective, this intercourse with the modern is surely complicated by modernism's own insistent conflation of formal and social action and the forms of the informal have long resonated with many of modernism's own aspirations. Seen from a distance, the prismatic assemblages of houses on the hillsides above Rio evoke both modernisms' Mediterranean ideal. And, for those in rebellion against the schematic rationality of modernism in decline – especially the penal order of the American housing projects that represented so much of what seemed pernicious about architecture in the sixties and seventies – the picturesque, “irrational” order of these settlements appeared a bracing antidote, linking formal variety, meandering, medieval geometry, and the liberating vibe of an “architecture without architects”. Indeed, this was a big part of the dream, a way around the complicity of the architectural

profession in a classist, top-down, mode of spatial production, a restoration of the liberatory basis for modernity.

The idea of informal, user-generated, and restive practices of settlement also aligns with a renewed focus on the idea and value of neighborhoods, the evolution of the quantitative schema of modern planning. As one casts about for a concept to assimilate place and culture, this elastic increment seems to be a non-prejudicial, global, descriptor that embraces dimension, ecology, and community. This kind of analysis was typified by Jane Jacobs, who posited an opposition between the formal and the informal *within* the modern city. For her, the contest for the soul of urbanity was between the one-dimensional command urbanism represented by Robert Moses - the deracinated, un-textured architectures of urban renewal - and the informal styles of neighborliness and cooperation that could only be conducted by local diversity and the accumulation of social – and spatial - capital.

Informal communities have simultaneously distressed and fascinated observers for decades because they offer a set of practices and possibilities that illuminate larger questions about the future of the city and not simply because the exponential growth of these settlements has made them the literal future of global urbanism, but more importantly because so many have read into them a nearly utopian horizon for self-organization, an urban state of nature. The now dominant conceptual axis of this theoretical appreciation stems from the proposition, first articulated by Henri Lefebvre and later taken up by David Harvey, Don Mitchell and others world-wide, of “the right to the city” and, more specifically, the right not simply of access and use but of the *production* of the city, something that is literalized by the legions of self-help and autonomous builders who create and transform the urbanism of “informality”.

The question I want to take up is how the lessons of informality can be read back onto the development of the modern city, the historic paradigm for growth and form that dominates not simply western practice but which continues to be the replacement model – the medium of annihilation - for the informal city around the world. In doing this, I don’t wish to repudiate modernist ideology in its entirety as I do not see its principles and practices as simply Foucauldian nightmares, capitalist instruments for the coercing subjectivity. Indeed, there is something vexing about the *pejorative* reading back of certain modernist formal ideals onto informal spaces, the thought that such fundamentals as sunlight, clean air, greenery, personal space, hygiene and other touchstones must be read as inimical to freedom, autonomy, and difference. My question, then, is about a potential for exchange between these worlds of illusory binarism, how their variegated progressive aspirations can be reciprocally assimilated.

In my student days in architecture school, we were deeply fascinated by squatter settlements, informal urbanism, and “self-help” housing. There was a group of earnest investigators at MIT – John Turner most prominent among them – who were involved in what was a classic straddle of the sixties, bridging the roles of activist, investigator, and designer. Latin American informality in particular (the central role of Latin American area studies in the invention of the discourses of informality has been marked by many) represented a number of things for us. To begin, it was the marker of architects and planners engaged in struggle with the mode of production that was being taught in our universities, a contest between increasingly arid formal investigations and the sense of social purpose which was not simply an artifact of the times but which lingered as a category in the sputtering modernist enterprise that formed the ideological core of most American architectural schools. “Housing” and “Advocacy” were the key frames of our push-back and we were very much the legatees of the movements for housing reform that arose in the nineteenth century, which themselves had formed the ideological substrate for the modernist project to house the world, a contradiction we sought to unpack.

The idea of “housing” as an urban or architectural category implied an idea about *mass* housing which, in turn, suggested a condition in which not simply was a particular form of subjectivity identified and foregrounded but in which those subjects were seen to have a special species of rights and particular formal requirements, figuring a certain communal *Gestalt*. The ideal subject of this formulation was a mythical urban proletarian and the architectural polemic that emerged to describe his or her rights compounded ideas about uniformity, economy, and style. The revolutionary vector of equality translated itself – in the architectural field – into a precise and insistent measure of both literal and visual parity and into strategies for the seriatim reproduction and deployment of endless uniform habitations. It insistently begged the question of the minimum, a theme that arose out of the confabulation of shortage and an ethics of parsimoniousness that was meant to suggest a kind of righteous working class solidarity but which was produced from a perspective of bourgeois charity.

Both in the nineteenth century formulation and our own, the animating issue that defines the idea of “housing” as a category – and the broader idea of the informal - is that of scarcity. And, there continue to be two undergirding approaches produced in the context of shortage: redistribution and economy of means. The classic reading of the redistributive approach is Friedrich Engels’ *The Housing Question*, which argues that the shortage is not in housing but equity. This argument abides today, both in terms of the unequal distribution of property but also – more and more prominently - in the uneven consumption of resources and production of effluent in an era of global peril. This begs the second question which lies in the idea of a connection between the technical and the ethical, residing in the “small is beautiful” approach to our moral and environmental commons, a doubling back with a new data set. The modernist idea of the

Existenzminimum the expression of sustainability *avant la lettre*, an early address to the finitude of global resources.

By the time I encountered “housing” as a problematic, it was already deeply inflected with the negative. Housing was for the poor, for the unemployed, for people of color. It was the incarnation of segregation, a new form of ghetto, a prison, an unproductive and criminal place, a symbol of the failure of a marginalized population to gain any purchase in the system. Against this monolithic, repressive, and ugly architecture, the idea of the informal or squatter settlement seemed to offer a set of alternatives. One of the key valences of progressive architecture (and the politics that informed it) was the idea of user-control, of a physical environment rendered more and more personal and tractable by technology and by an idea about “flexibility” that permeated the discourse. This took a variety of forms, many of which assumed associations of both freedom and righteousness in concepts of impermanence, mobility, and malleability, most often understood in terms of consumer rather than democratic choice. In an era when the promise of property was, to put it mildly, under question, a romantic cachet attached also itself to the idea of ephemerality via our newly growing environmentalism which celebrated the use of found materials and off-the-shelf solutions. To be sure, this was a way for first world architectural discourse to extend the basic parameters of functionalist minimalism by arrogating the luster of the struggles for justice in the third. But, while there was an envious – even colonial – component in this gaze, it also was also an expression of genuine solidarity and recognition that the problems of both scarcity and runaway urban growth were not parochial but planetary.

The response in the “western” architectural community organized itself into both applications at home and into systems of rationalization directed at the transformation of developing-world settlements *in situ*. Manifestations of this ethos in alternative practices took several directions, which embodied a scale of informalities differentiated by the level of professional expertise and the culture of inhabitation embodied both literally and representationally. In places like London and New York, there was fairly extensive, quasi-formalized squatting of abandoned buildings and tenant take-overs of neglected properties and I enjoyed a brief experience of this in early 70’s London. These squatters were, clearly, the children of Engels and for “illegals” in Earl’s Court or the Lower East Side, the occupation of empty buildings was a strategy for survival, a form of redress, and mode of propaganda. Much as occurred in the squatter settlements of the developing world, confrontations with the authorities focused both on questions of property rights and on the provision of services like water, power, and sewerage. Our own squat was enabled by a legal mandate to provide such services to inhabited dwellings.

The contemporary Occupy movement is clearly an heir to these tactics and begs not simply the question of housing inequality (thrown into great relief by the mortgage melt-down) but the linked question of what constitutes public space - the formal matrix of community - and the right to the city more generally. Understanding that ideas of public and private are always produced reciprocally - and the sorting out of rights and responsibilities for this differentiation as a matter of spatial proprietorship - lies at the core of the imbrication of the idea of housing (and the city) with the idea of freedom. Clearly, informal housing cannot be approached without addressing the nature of property and the classic point of departure is the private appropriation of public land (although this is becoming less and less the predominant model as the informal is progressively “rationalized”) and the movement, on the one hand, to establish some form of individual security of tenure and, on the other, a connectedness to the webs of public infrastructure that formalize the relationship and establish the particularity of the social construction of place.

Using the experience of the “sixties” in the U.S. as model of working out the reception of these “third-world” practices, the other close simulacrum was a more elective form squatting, the communalism of so-called alternative communities, many of which involved self-executed building of relatively simple shelters. Of these one of the most memorable was Drop City, an exemplar not simply of a minimum consumption lifestyle and an economy that not simply sat outside of disdained formal arrangements but which produced a set of architectural artifacts that embodied the ethos of material minimalism and re-use that have been central to the aura of informality that has been particularly embraced by first-world observers who have sought to impute a progressive cast to these places.

Drop City was especially resonant because of the visual particularity of the so-called “zomes” devised and constructed there under the guidance of Guru Steve Baer. These were Fuller-esque geodesics fabricated from the recycled carcasses of automobiles. Bucky domes were then the object of almost mystical reverence because of their succinct geometry, their modularity, and their rich imputation of universality and economy. The use of abandoned cars - the detritus of the Fordist economy – also carried a critical vector, a swords to plowshares vibe, that added an additional patina of the political to the enterprise. Of course, there is a certain Marie Antoinette aspect to many of the intentional communities of the period that resided exactly in the *degre* of their intentionality, the fact that most of the inhabitants of these alternative communities had other alternatives. I do, however, want to make the argument that the right to the city must include the right to shape its form according to our artistic desires and reject a certain strain of joylessness that cannot find inspiration in acts of “empty” creativity.

Associated with this form of communal living was also a burgeoning nomadism, an elective version of the impermanence that characterized, on the one hand, the flows of refugees and the economically displaced into both camps and squatter settlements and, on the other, the dramatically increased mobility forced on participants in the American formal economy. There was, at the heart of the enterprise of both our middle class nomads and communards, a polemical positioning situated somewhere between politics and art – in that treacherous terrain of so-called lifestyles – that at once sought to assimilate the qualities of social life imputed to the improvisations of the deeply constrained poor and to offer a critique of the forcible character and miserable circumstances of the settlements that were the result. This exploration jibed well with a more general feeling about the need to create “responsive” environments that could be transformed to accommodate both immediate user needs as well as more general demographic trends, including the accelerating metamorphosis of living arrangements in the western world, particularly the decline of the nuclear family as the predominant increment of residential demand. It is certainly one of the ironies of the day that the informality of practices of customization and addition, rampant in the suburbs where our parents lived, were only later absorbed into this lexicon of freedom.

In the years since the decline in the appeal of modernist ideas of mass housing and government responsibility, there has been a displacement of the locus of public purpose in architecture from housing as the prototype for public intervention to “infrastructure”. The reasons for this shift include an apparent political neutrality that attaches itself to the idea of infrastructure as a semi-visible but ultimately universal system of support that defines both the limit and the obligation of the public realm. This line reproduces itself strategically in the dual approach to improving informal settlements, on the one hand, to provide basic municipal services as part of “upgrades in place” and, on the other, to offer titles to slum dwellers to secure the private control of the environments at the end of the water hook-up. While I will not go into the debate about the question of titling and the well-argued contention that this simply draws the poor deeper into a subservient relationship with the institutions of predatory capital, this does not gainsay the crucial element of environmental control as the emblem and the means of personal freedom in both the sense of being able to act to manage one’s personal future and that of one’s private environment and in the sense of freedom from the oppressions of manipulation by power and the dead-ends of the choicelessness that grows from inequality and disempowerment.

A key articulation of the idea of cross-over informality from my student days was that of the Dutch architect John Habraken and his notion of “supports.” This theory was, I think, emblematic of a certain level of ambivalence about the relationship between individual choice, the persistence of convention and tradition in the built environment, and the necessity for intervention at a scale consonant with the huge quantitative extent of the problem. Habraken offered a system that, in effect, proposed the construction of kind of loft city in which housing was recast as infrastructure; a series of vertical frameworks to be serially inhabited by individuals who would customize their own spaces – in conjunction with new kinds of industrial resources in developed environments - within what seemed to be a kind of generic, if putatively malleable, mega structure.

While never convincingly depicted, these support structures surely attempted to channel both a modernist fantasy of simultaneity and extent as well as a sense of the “mega structural” qualities of more timeless styles of building, the continuous morphologies of Italian hill towns, Islamic medinas, and other unitary but serial constructions. In that romanticized view-from-a-distance of the *favelas* on the Rio slopes, the same kind of idealized collective morphology was likewise shaped by this particular gaze. However, it is a mistake to moralize this reading as totally pernicious and misaligned. Complexity, variation, the view-over, local responsiveness to topography, party walls, expandability, and extremely situational and personal configurations are values in the built environment that enjoy valences exclusive of their production in conditions of exploitation, shortage, insalubriousness, lack of services, and the Big Intractable: inescapability

Habraken’s support *parti* represented a useful inversion of the actual conditions of squatter settlements as a way of transmitting what were seen as positive aspects of their character to more developed situations. That is, Habraken was proposing the provision of infrastructure *before* the fact of habitation as opposed to what had become a typical solution to the upgrading of squatter settlements in which infrastructure followed the basic acts of settlement and habitation. Of course, this begged the question of a paradigm of uniformity, of very large-scale intervention by the authorities, and of the base-line for replicability that it sought to critique. It also failed to establish the superiority of elasticity in place over the ability to change places. But there was, still, a useful site of ambiguity between the collective and the individual that was opened up and his frank attempt to merge mass-manufacture efficiencies with the ethos of DIY and self-help was tonic.

Habraken stood firmly on the shoulders of his colleague Turner who, while stridently denouncing the hegemony of heteronomous - other determined – systems over autonomous ones, recognized the ambiguities necessarily embedded in the approach, that the “freedom” he advocated was also a constraint. As he writes, “...self-help, if limited to a narrow, do-it-yourself sense, or even to group construction, can actually reduce autonomy by making excessive demands on personal time and energy and by reducing household mobility.” Turner was after a “third way” and argued, if not entirely persuasively, that government should cease “doing what it does badly or uneconomically – building and managing houses and

concentrate on what it has the authority to do: to ensure equitable access to resources which local communities and people cannot provide for themselves.” His main point was that housing decisions should be controlled by households, that “for a viable housing process to exist, local and personal control is essential” and he articulated the contingencies of such local networks, including economic land prices, abundant availability of tools and materials through local suppliers, easy local credit and locally based supply and organizational systems and summarized, “When dwellers control the major decisions and are free to make their own contribution to the design construction or management of their housing, both the process and the environment produced stimulate individual and social well-being.”

Applying the inventive character of informality to the modernist city begs the primary contradiction of the idea of the large-scale design of informality. This will always entail, of course, not the design of settlements *per se* but of their circumstances and will embrace a permanent elasticity in the nature of both subsidy - or support - and freedom. At the van of is the constitution of the public to which these solutions are addressed and from which they rise. The genius and impossibility of the informal city, however, is that it is authentically dialectical, in a constant state of often confusing becoming. As Vyjayanthi Rao succinctly puts it, “The reason to value this kind of blurring is so that we may acknowledge the informal simultaneously as organizing principle and as substantive form rather than defer and subordinate the one to the other.” She concludes that the “Problem of the informal is quintessentially a design problem”. By this she means, I think, that we must plunge in, that theorization should not impede action. What, after all, do we risk by making places freer and more habitable by every means at our disposal?