Zones of Conflict: Laboratories for Changing Practices
Border Zones as Sites of Intervention

In the last years, we have been investigating critical issues of urbanization and citizenship that emerge from observing the many communities that flank the U.S.–Mexico border. The Tijuana–San Diego border has served as our laboratory from which to rethink current politics of surveillance, immigration and labour, the polarization of informal and formal systems of urbanization and the widening gap between wealth and poverty.

The political specificity of this bi-national region has been our point of entry into other radical localities, distributed across the continents, arguing that some of the most relevant projects and new practices of urban intervention, forwarding socio-economic inclusion and artistic experimentation will not emerge from sites of economic power but from sites of poverty, in the midst of conflicts between geopolitical borders, natural resources and marginalized communities — sites where the collision between top-down and bottom-up urban development is most dramatic. We have been proposing a paradigm shift to rethink the role of architecture and political theory in geographies of conflict. New conceptual frameworks are needed, as well as new procedures of engagement, to straddle two radically different ways of constructing the city.

We live and work in a zone of conflict and poverty that divides two cities, two countries, two continents, two hemispheres. In fact, the border cities of San Diego and Tijuana, together comprise the largest bi-national metropolitan region in the world, with 100,000 border crossings every day. Our region is paradigmatic of the uneven urban growth of the last decades that has polarized centres of wealth and poverty across the world. Urban asymmetry is physicalized in our region, as some of the poorest, most marginalized informal settlements in Latin America sit just minutes away from San Diego’s mega-wealthy suburban paradise, crashing against the gates of what is often called “America’s finest city.” This border region where we live and work is a microcosm of all of the conflicts and deprivations that globalization has inflicted on the world’s poorest people, intensified by two geo-political institutions: first, the NAFTA treaty — the North American Free Trade Agreement — that enables multi-national corporations to set up maquiladoras on the peripheries of Tijuana, where they generate massive profits freed from any restriction on labour practices, environmental protection and urban zoning regulation; and second, an aggressively militarized political border that cuts across and radically disrupts the social, economic and environmental ecologies that situate and give meaning to people’s lives in this region.
Both of our practices — in social and political theory; and in art, architecture and urbanization — are held together by a thread that we would like to explore further here. In our work together, we have been interested in exploring the convergence of informal flows in twenty-first-century cities (social, moral, economic, spatial, urban), and the way formal institutions have been compelled to invest resources in enabling and scaling up these bottom-up dynamics. One aspect of our work focuses on the sociological effects of bottom-up development, how the circulation of norms and beliefs in shared spaces construct patterns of group life endogenously — essentially how reciprocal expectations among the co-habitants of space informally generate patterns of collective behaviour. We have learned from the visionary Mayor of Bogotá, Colombia, Antanas Mockus that engaging the city at this informal, normative level is essential to rethinking strategies of urbanization. In tandem, we are investigating the physical implications or consequences of social informality, particularly among people navigating conditions of scarcity, and the emergence of informal settlements, economic flows and general strategies of collective survival.

These bottom-up phenomena have exploded in the last years of global economic boom, with the rapid urbanization of the world’s population, and the proliferation of slums on the peripheries of global cities everywhere. We have witnessed how the different kinds of exclusionary power operating across the San Diego — Tijuana border have provoked the small border neighbourhoods that surround it to construct practices of adaptation and resiliency in order to transgress imposed political and economic forces, pointing to other ways of constructing city, other ways of constructing citizenship. We have been investigating how these bottom-up forms of local socio-economic production — operating outside of formal institutions — can help us formulate alternative economies of development and urbanization.

While our attention has focused on these emergent forms of bottom-up urbanization, however, the ultimate goal of our practical work together in San Diego/Tijuana and other cities is to seek ways by which this knowledge can trickle upwards to transform top-down urban policy. We are not developing theories of informality that let formal institutions off the hook, in terms of social welfare and inclusive governance. In fact, most of our research and practical work explores the way exemplary municipalities like Medellín, Colombia have committed to “co-producing” the city, investing top down resources and capacities to support, and give full integrity to, the intelligent efficacy of bottom-up processes. We are seeking new models to facilitate interfaces between the top-down and the bottom-up.

**Shifting Practices**

For these reasons, one primary site of intervention today is the widening gap between institutions of knowledge and the public: How to mobilize new interfaces between the specialized knowledge of institutions and the community-based knowledge embedded in marginalized neighbourhoods. We insist that it is only through a meeting of knowledges that we can instigate a new civic imagination. This entails a critical intervention into our own practices and research protocols — cultivating epistemic and professional fallibility, learning to speak in languages that communicate beyond our own professional knowledge silos, and learning to listen and recognize the value of alternative ways of seeing and doing.

On one hand, we must question the role of architecture and urban planning, art and the humanities in engaging the major problems of urban development today, as well as the social and political sciences, and their obsession with quantified data as the only way to measure social inequity without giving us any qualitative way out of the problem. In other words, it is not enough only to reveal the socio-economic histories and injustices that have produced these crises, but it is essential that theory and practice become instruments to construct specific strategies for transcending them; it is not enough for architecture and urban planning to camouflage, with hyper-aesthetics and forms of beautification, the exclusionary politics and economics of urban development; at this moment, it is not buildings but the fundamental reorganization of socio-economic relations that must ground the expansion of democratization and urbanization. In the same manner, it is not enough for social and political sciences to simply “measure” and expose the institutional mechanisms that have produced current socio-economic inequality — important though that element is — but it is essential that they communicate these measurements to those who can make use of them, and work with communities to develop policy proposals and counter urban development strategies to re-imagine how the surplus value of urbanization can be redirected to sites of marginalization.

What this suggests is a double project, one that exposes the institutional mechanisms that have systematically and through often overtly racist and nationalist policies, produced social stigmas, and the political and economic forces that perpetuate marginalization; but also one that simultaneously intervenes in the gap between top-down resources and bottom-up agency, avoiding the trap of static victimization that sometimes undermines capacity within marginalized communities for political agency. But the formation of new platforms of engagement in our creative fields can only be made possible with a sense of urgency, pushing us to rethink our very procedures. The need for expanded modes of artistic practice, pedagogy and research,
which, connected to new sites of investigation and collaboration, can generate new conceptions of cultural and economic production, as well as the reorganization of social relations seem more urgent than ever.

This dual project of research and action must dwell within the specificity of these urban conflicts, exposing the particularity of hidden institutional histories, revealing the missing information that can enable us to think politically and piece together a more accurate, anticipatory urban research and design intervention. It is in fact at the collision between the top-down and the bottom-up where a new urban political economy can emerge. What is needed is a more critical role for design to encroach into the fragmented and discriminatory policies and economics that have produced these collisions in the first place. Artists and architects have a role in conceptualizing such new protocols. In other words, it is the construction of the political itself that is at stake here: not just political art or architecture. This opens up the idea that architects and artists, besides being researchers and designers of form, buildings and objects, can be designers of political processes, urban pedagogy, alternative economic models and collaborations across institutions and jurisdictions to assure accessibility and socio-economic justice. This means we need to expand forms of practice, through which design takes a less protagonist role, via small, incremental acts of alteration of existing urban fabrics and regulation to mobilize counter-propositions to the privatization of public domain and infrastructure. The most radical intervention in our time can emerge from specific, bottom-up urban and regulatory alterations, modest in nature, but with enough resolution and assurance to trickle up to transform top down institutional structures. And this is the reason, we maintain, that the project of rethinking urban inequality today is not primarily an architectural or artistic project but a political one, a project that architects and artists can mobilize.

This new political project also demands cross-sector institutions to confront socio-economic inequality, seeking to elevate marginalized communities not only as sites of stigmatization, alienation and control, but primarily as sites of activism and praxis, where citizens themselves, pressed by the urgencies of socio-economic injustice, are pushed to imagine alternative spatial and socio-economic protocols. It is in the periphery, where conditions of social emergency are transforming our ways of thinking about urban matters, and the matters of concern about the city.

From Binary to Dialectic: Revisiting the Formal-Informal Question
Many practitioners and academics have been uncertain about the distinction between formal and informal urban dynamics. In fact, the "informal" is a dangerous word for many scholars who suggest that formal and informal categories do not exist, that they are mutually inclusive and that this polarization has not been fruitful in the construction of a more emancipatory consensus-democratic agenda for the city and the thinking of new models of infrastructure. But we believe that as long as socio-economic urban inequality and conflict exist in the city, we will continue experiencing bottom-up resistance and resilience in the shape of counter-urban tactics of adaptation of, and in some cases transgression to imposed urban, economic and political agendas that negate the local and contingent particularities of everyday life in many marginalized communities around the globe.

How to rethink top-down institutions of development while acknowledging emergent, temporal and socio-economic urban conditions by engaging more agile management systems to facilitate differential dynamics in the contemporary city, negotiating large and small scales, public and private gradations and incremental adaptive growth? This eruption of informal urbanization has provoked these fundamental questions for us, as well as our desire to recalibrate the totalizing abstraction of certain fit-all urban recipes to enable a more socially and economically inclusive political economy of urban development. But just like democracy itself, the project of urbanization is always in flux; and just when we think we have accomplished the consensus agenda of a "melting pot" cosmopolitanism we realize we have only arrived to urban homogenization, where conflict is camouflaged, the neoliberal paradigm of gentrification ascends beneath a veneer of "creative class" innovation and multicultural inclusion, while the city is divided between enclaves of wealth and poverty.

Therefore our position here about the informal and its effects in shifting practices pertains first and foremost to the issue of socio-economic inequality. To confront poverty today we need first to intervene into our own fields of specialization, recalibrating our own practices, re-tooling ourselves in order to understand and engage the reorganization of formal institutions and their protocols. This also requires new spaces for collaboration across sectors that can link top-down and bottom-up interests to mobilize an unprecedented project of redistribution of both resources and knowledges across metropolitan, regional and continental scales.

While we understand the risk of perpetuating an oppositional relationship between formal and informal categories, we want to begin by acknowledging their difference. There has been a tendency across specialized creative fields to evade binary relations as a point of departure in the construction of new conceptual paradigms; probably still driven by the heritage of a cultural ideology that elevated concepts such as cultural relativism, hybrid identities, and the blurring of differential categories. While much of this “postmodern” scholarship and practice presented us with these new procedures to negotiate the established hierarchical and rational structures of modern thinking, it also exerted damage in our recognition of difference and conflict in the advancement of exclusionary neoliberal political economies since the early 1980s to now. We think it is time to reformulate the “politics of difference” as a tool that can penetrate the mechanisms that have produced today’s socio-economic crisis, and it is here where the dialectic between formal and informal systems becomes a device to visualize conflict, enabling new strategies to mediate the top-down and the bottom-up.

In other words, any debate about the relation between the formal and the informal in the contemporary city today must begin with the question of inequality, and as such, this question must focus on confronting the institutional processes responsible...
for producing urban poverty. So, the formal-informal opposition we are advancing here is a point of entry into urban crisis, but we are not advancing a binary relation, as this would only perpetuate the polarization of such categories. We are proposing a dialectical understanding of their relation that enables us to “enter into” and negotiate the interface between them. The goal is to transcend binary stasis through dialectical tension and creativity, in search of a new Hegelian synthesis, new zones of research, and a new language. We are seeking new mediating practices to facilitate modes of intervention into the space of collision between visible, exclusionary top-down institutional policy and invisible, bottom-up socio-economic agency.

In addition, skepticism towards the formal-informal binary has produced, primarily in the fields of architecture, an indifference to the socio-economic and political conditions that can in fact “complicate” architectural form today. This denigration of the “bottom-up” has been the DNA of “autonomy” in architecture, whose recurring avant-garde utopian dream throughout history has always been to give formal order to the chaos of social difference by imposing structural and compositional strategies that somehow will bring political, cultural, and aesthetic unity to a society gone amok. While we agree with recent political stances in architecture to return to a notion of “autonomy” in order to resist the aesthetic relativism behind the speculative commercial logic of hyper-capitalism, we are critical of the nostalgic return to a top-down autonomous and self-referential language as the only way out of this continued “post-modern nightmare”. And while we also agree with how autonomy’s critique has been oriented to the bottom-up consumerist politics of neoliberalism, we equally condemn its abandonment of bottom-up social movements and the contested space between the public and the private, whose antagonism is at the centre of the “political” in urbanization today. After all, without a progressive welfare state to support the reinstating of an architectural public and social agenda at a massive scale, the void will be filled by anti-democratic governments, autocratic dictatorships and the corporate neoliberal economic power of privatization to build these top-down architectural dreams of the future.

For these reasons, the misunderstanding of formal-informal relations can only lead to urban paradigms that unify and materialize the universalist, consensus politics of neoliberal global capital, into an apolitical formalist project of beautification, whose relentless homogeneity and parametric veneer hide any vestige of difference, and the conflicts that drive today’s urban crisis and negate the multiplicity of socio-economic relations that should inspire new, more experimental architectural paradigms today.

The Informal as Praxis: New Urban Processes to Challenge Neoliberal Hegemony

The neoliberal political economy of urban growth has widened the gap between rich and poor, and has produced dramatic marginalization and an expansion of slums surrounding major urban centres. This uneven urbanization is at the centre of today’s socio-economic crises and urban conflicts, and has resulted in the incremental erosion of a public imagination, as many governments around the world welcomed the encroachment of the private into the public.

Since the early 1980s, with the ascendance of neoliberal economic policies based on the deregulation and privatization of public resources, we have witnessed how an unchecked culture of individual and corporate greed has deepened income inequality and social disparity. This new period of institutional unaccountability and illegality has been framed politically by the erroneous idea that democracy is the “right to be left alone”; a private dream devoid of social responsibility. The shift of resources from the many to the very few has exerted great violence to our public institutions and our social economy. This polarization of wealth and poverty mirrors the polarization of public and private resources — they are causally linked — and this has had profound implications for the evolution of the contemporary city and the uneven growth that has radically expanded peripheral territories of poverty.

While it is undeniable that these slums have erupted as the underbelly of exclusionary global neoliberal economic policies that have turned cities like Tijuana into tax-free factory-cities, where multinationals set up shop to take advantage of cheap labour and benefit from these zones of exception to avoid any sort of regulation against human exploitation and environmental degradation, they are also intensive urbanizations of juxtaposition, emblematic of how Tijuana’s informal communities are growing faster than the urban cores they surround, creating a different set of rules for development, and blurring the distinctions between the urban, the suburban and the rural. How do we intervene into these environments? Beyond the institutions of charity that engage vertically with momentary and often descending humanitarian pity, muddling the difference between resistance and complicity; and beyond applied academic research that, again vertically, treats these communities as subjects to be “randomized” and “assessed”; and beyond the indifference of corrupt governments that in the name of austerity have allied themselves with greedy corporate interests, further marginalizing these neighbourhoods?

This hijacking of the public by the private has been mobilized by a powerful elite of individuals and corporations who, under a banner of free-market economic freedom, has enjoyed the endorsement of federal and municipal governments who continue to deregulate and privatize public resources and spaces of the city. This has prompted many planning and economic development offices to “unplug” from communities and neighbourhoods at the margins of predictable zones of economic investment, resulting in the uneven urban development that has characterized many cities across the world, from Shanghai to New York City. This retreat of the institutions of governance from public investment has resulted also in the erosion of public participation in the urban political process, as many communities affected by this public withdrawal have not been meaningfully involved in the planning processes behind these urban transformations, nor benefited from the municipal and private profits they engendered.

In this context, one of the most important aims of our research has been to produce new conceptions and interpretations of the informal. Instead of a fixed category or style, we see the informal as a set of urban practices that transgress imposed political boundaries and top-down economic models. Recall how Christopher Alexander’s theories of “pattern language” in the 1960s were hijacked by the field of architecture and reduced to a stylistic sense of regionalism, and a folkloric idea of the vernacular. A more critical reading of Alexander would recognize that language is less a fixed category, than a performative system capable of reorganizing the political economy
of building. Likewise, we are interested in translating the actual operative processes behind informal practices into new tactics of urban intervention to challenge existing, formal protocols of economic development.

In essence, neoliberal hegemony has turned the city into a site of consumption and display. At the same time, informal neighbourhoods at the margins of these centres of economic power were growing, and sustaining themselves with their own resources and the logics of local productivity. In these peripheral communities, we find economic configurations that emerge and thrive through the tactical adaptation and retrofit of existing discriminating zoning and exclusionary economic development, producing a different notion of the “political” and of the “economic”. These stealth practices reside at the intersection between formal and informal urbanizations and the conflicts between top-down policy and bottom-up social contingency and survival. It is from these informal settlements worldwide that a new politics of urban growth for the contemporary city is being shaped, often off the radar of those who formally define the categories of urban development.

Through this lens, we 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. We see the informal as the urban unwanted, that which is left over after the pristine presence of architecture with capital “A” has been usurped and transformed into the tenuous scaffold for social encounters. Primarily, because of our work in marginal border neighbourhoods in San Diego and Tijuana, we see the informal as the site of a new interpretation of community and citizenship, understanding the informal not as an aesthetic category but as praxis. This is the reason we are interested in the emergent urban configurations produced out of social emergency, and the performative role of individuals constructing their own spaces, and their economic relations.

A community is always in dialogue with its immediate social and ecological environment; this is what defines its political nature. But when this relationship is disrupted and its productive capacity splintered by the very way in which jurisdictional power is instituted, it is necessary to find a means of recuperating its agency. This agency and activism can be found in informal urbanization, which we see not only as an image of institutional alienation and poverty exploitation but as a set of everyday practices that enable communities to negotiate time, space, boundaries and resources in conditions of emergency. We can learn from these urban processes in order to reimagine the meaning of public infrastructure in the official city and to mobilize new forms of accountability in institutions of planning and private industry, as well as to recognize these communities as agents capable of political action.

But as we return to these informal dynamics for clues, their stealth urban praxis also needs artistic interpretation and political representation and this should be one of the spaces of intervention for contemporary architectural practice, engaging the specificity of the political within the performativity of the informal as the main creative tool to expand notions of design. Beyond architectural form, designers can also design forms of socio-economic exchange that can frame a more inclusive urbanization.

Moreover, while it is compelling to witness the creative intelligence and entrepreneurship embedded in these informal communities, we must ensure that by elevating this creativity, we do not unwittingly send a message to governments and other sources of economic support, that because these communities are so “entrepreneurial”, they are capable of sustaining themselves without public support and that institutions, across sectors, can ethically unplug from these precarious environments. There is a tendency to think of informality in formal terms, referring primarily to whether or not economic activity is encapsulated within formal market processes and thus whether its practitioners participate in and avail themselves of the resources of the welfare state. This is certainly one way of thinking about informality, a view propagated by the Peruvian economist Hernando De Soto and others. There is obviously great importance to these issues, particularly their relation to the maintenance of a healthy welfare state, so this debate is important from the perspective of social equity.

But it is not enough simply to give property titles to slum dwellers to incorporate them into the official economy without the social protection mechanisms that can guarantee environmental and social justice. Otherwise, we risk perpetuating these environments as laboratories of neoliberal economic tinkering, based on individuals improving and selling their own parcels as commodities, without any social protection mechanisms that can avoid exploitation by the neoliberal machine that neglects local communities and their social and economic well-being.

It is with these complexities in mind, that we have been researching the dynamics of resilience and adaptation in informal urbanization. We maintain that learning from these bottom-up forms of local socio-economic production is essential to rethinking urban sustainability, focusing on neighbourhoods as sites of environmental, cultural, and economic productivity. We realize that when these two topics — neighbourhood marginalization and economic productivity — are brought together, some academics and practitioners from the left get nervous, since this might suggest a complicity with the logics of top-down privatization and disinvestment, or that the language of entrepreneurship, resilience and sustainability resonates with neoliberal urban rhetoric. We want to reframe these terms and give them meaning through a more robust community-based engagement. What we mean here is that one of the most fundamental questions today is how to mobilize other economic pro-formas of development that are neighbourhood-led and whose profits benefit the community and not private developers only.

Ultimately, these bottom-up urban transformations demand that we expand existing categories of zoning, producing alternative densities and transitional uses that can directly respond to the emergent political and economic informality that play in the contemporary city. It is, in fact, the political and cultural dimension of informal housing and density as tools for social integration in the city that can be the conceptual armature for urbanism today. How to enable these micro-urbanisms to alter the rigidity of the discriminatory public policies of the contemporary city? How can the human capacity and creative intelligence embedded in informal urbanization be amplified as the main armature for challenging the hegemony of the neoliberal city?
Mediating the Top-down and the Bottom-up: Latin America and the Search for a New Civic Imagination

In recent years, our research has focused on the most compelling cases of informal urbanization across Latin America, and how to translate them into a new political language with particular spatial consequences, from which to produce new paradigms of housing, infrastructure, property and citizenship, inspiring "other" modes of intervention into the contemporary city.

Making urban development more democratic today is an urgent matter, because it has been controlled by a few urban actors — namely, the alliance of private developers, housing authorities and municipal governments. The question ought to be how to open alternative points of access into urbanization, expanding the horizon of opportunity for others (i.e., artists and architects as developers, communities as developers, etc.) so that other forms of economic development can emerge, supported by more inclusive and collaborative forms of governance. This might seem unattainable today, but examples of more democratic forms of urbanization, and a commitment to social justice in the city, have already happened throughout Latin America. It is there where many cities across the continent have begun to rethink public infrastructure by enabling inclusive political and civic processes, whose main function is to negotiate interfaces between the top-down and bottom-up, tapping into diverse social networks, informal economies, and imaginative forms of public participation.

The evidence of such developments is found in a lineage of progressive institutional transformations across the continent. Some date back to São Paulo's Sescs (Social Service of Commerce/Serviço Social do Comércio), privately run, non-profit institutions that promote culture and healthy living in urban communities. Founded in 1946, these engines for "rethinking citizenship through cultural action" have spread throughout Brazil, and the city of São Paulo alone has 15 operating today. They are organized and run by social and cultural entrepreneurs, and focus on education, health and culture at the neighbourhood scale. In the 1970s, Curitiba Mayor, Jaime Lerner re-imagined the notion of infrastructure as a mediating system to manage urban complexity, through low-tech and economic strategies of adaptation of existing spaces in the city, which paved the way for the renowned Bus Rapid Transit system, which became emblematic of intelligent mass transportation in the next decades.

Also significant was the idea of community-based cultural dissemination from Porto Alegre, Brazil, where in 1989 participatory budgeting began to link urban policy and public participation. The transformations of Favela Bairro in Rio da Janeiro, Brazil, that began to take place in 1995 under the leadership of Sérgio Magalhães, engaged slums as new laboratories to rethink community-based, anti-gentrification development.

Antanas Mockus, a mathematician, philosopher, and former university rector, was twice elected Mayor of Bogotá in the mid-1990s and early 2000s. He came into office in a period of intense violence and urban chaos, and has become legendary for the ways he intervened into the behavioural patterns of the city. The election of Mockus in 1995 initiated a project of constructing a civic culture mediated by urban pedagogy — an urban educational model deployed as a generative tool for rethinking public infrastructure and social norms.

Mockus insisted that before transforming the physical city, we need to transform social behaviour; and maintained that infrastructural intervention and the deepening of social service commitments were only half the story. Top-down intervention was key, but a corresponding transformation of social norms, changing hearts from the bottom-up, was the key to sustainable urban transformation.

These creative urban policies and projects, aimed at re-imagining the relations between social norms and the city — from the Sescs to Antanas Mockus — all converge in the case of Medellín, Colombia, where confronting urban conflict became a catalyst for dramatic urban transformation.

Medellín was the most violent city in the world in the late 1980s and early 1990s. A series of visionary mayors were determined to design new rights to the city, and construct a more radical and democratic urbanization. Medellín's determination to reduce poverty and violence was activated through experiments in collaborative municipal governance and planning, the coordination of massive cross-sector investments in public infrastructure and social services in the poorest and most violent comunas in the city, and the cultivation of a vibrant, participatory civic culture. Medellín was remarkable not only for its renowned public architecture and infrastructural interventions, but primarily for the egalitarian vision that inspired them, and the innovative political and civic processes that enabled them.

Among the most salient ideas behind the Medellín project were the rethinking and validation of transparent public management, a new role of government in curating cross-institutional collaborations to transform public spaces as places of education. This project was emblematized by the famous Library Parks, which were built in the most marginalized zones of the city, as a way to fight the root of violence — poverty — through education and public investment.

While these amazing urban transformations were made possible by rethinking municipal bureaucracy, public management and reorienting surplus value toward the poorest zones in the city, all these examples are characterized by a commitment to what we might call a "civic imagination", a way of thinking collectively about urban life that we have lost, not only in the United States but also incrementally across Europe during the recent years of decline in public spending, and the demonization of the welfare state. For these reasons, the case of Medellín is one of the most compelling stories because it gives us a powerful example of how a new political project can emerge that prioritizes equality and is generative of new forms of collaborative governance. As Medellín's former mayor Sergio Fajardo frequently points out, what transformed this city was not architectural or urban intervention; it...
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Bogotá, Antanas Mockus and his research team at Corpovisionarios. The catalyst for
our own partnership, in fact, was our long connections with these Colombian cities.
Translating and appropriating the models of Medellín and Bogotá, particularly the
informal dimensions of these models, has been essential in rethinking our research
and practice. Our two main projects pertaining to these cases are the Medellín Di-
agram in partnership with Echeverri and the Binational Citizenship Culture Survey in
partnership with Mockus and Corpovisionarios:

Translating Process: The Medellín Diagram and the Cross-Border Citizen

It is from Latin America that we have learned most about local municipal and civic
processes designed to produce more equitable forms of urbanization. In the last
years, we have been interested in carrying these Latin American lessons to the San
Diego-Tijuana border region, where we are investigating informal urban dynamics
and citizenship culture as tools to transform urban and environmental policy. We
have been developing, what we might call, “translation” projects in the last years,
to appropriate these Latin American models and adapt their engagement with the
informal to our own distinctive cross-border context. Medellín and Bogotá have been
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Diagramming Process in Medellín

Medellín has gained global attention in recent years for the transformations that
took place there, with frequent stories in the major global newspapers, as well as
global prizes like the Urban Land Institute’s “Most Innovative City” award in 2013,
funded by Citibank with the Wall Street Journal. Medellín was also the site of the
UN-Habitat’s World Urban Forum in April 2014. For those of us interested in facili-
tating converges between bottom-up and top-down in pursuit of a more equitable
urban development, the attention Medellín has received has been a double-edged
sword. On the one hand, yes: it is gratifying that institutions have acknowledged
the excellence of the architectural and infrastructural interventions, situated in the
most vulnerable sites across the city. Medellín has captured rightful attention for
this egalitarian architectural gesture, and for the positive impact these interventions
have had on poverty, crime and public health. But on the other hand, there are
also problems with the narrative that has evolved. There is a tendency to miss the
radical tactics of the mayors who effected these major shifts, by characterizing the
transformations in a smooth neoliberal language of economic development that was
stewarded by public-private partnerships that expanded public transport, opened
markets and attracted foreign investment.

What the conventional narrative misses is the role of the bottom up in the long
history of urbanization in Medellín. The historically marginalized informal comunas
of the city were not simply the needy recipients of top-down planning and charitable
intervention, but were agents in an inclusive process of co-production, where shared
responsibility and the mediation of institutions and communities produced very
different ideas of local governance and urbanization.

Medellín is a story about how a public, unified across socio-economic divides,
reclaimed the future of its own city. Ultimately, it is not by emulating buildings and
transport systems that cities across the globe can begin to approximate the inclusive
urbanization that transformed Medellín, and improved quality of life for the most vul-
nerable demographics over the last two decades. The key is to understand process, and
that process must be responsive to the specificities of time and place, and how embedded
socio-economic relations and conflicts can be the foundations for a new political reality.

But to elevate Medellín as a political and civic model that might be translated
and adapted to other contexts, it is essential to understand just how the city managed
to reorient resources on such a massive scale toward sites of greatest need. What
must a city do, become, to pull off such an unprecedented accomplishment? How
did government need to transform? What kinds of institutional intersections were
necessary? How were these interventions funded? What was the role of the bottom-up
in enabling these interventions to succeed and sustain themselves over time?

These are the questions we wanted to pursue. These are the processes we wanted
to translate, so that Medellín might become intelligible, not only as a set of build-
ings, structures and spaces but primarily as an imaginative set of political and civic
processes that organized themselves around what we ended up calling the “informal
public demands”, which we elaborate in the next section. Piecing these fragments
together, translating and adapting them to the particularities of other contexts was
essential, we thought, since the global media outlets were focusing on the final
architectural and urban products but very seldom on the institutional reform that
took place before physical interventions happened.

We began to work closely with Echeverri, in collaboration with his URBAM think
tank, based at EAFIT University, to lead a project called “Visualizing Citizenship”. This
project takes the shape of a relational physical map that visualizes and makes acces-
sible the complexity of Medellín’s political and civic processes, including unortho-
dox cross-institutional collaborations and processes of urban public management that
synergized community-based agencies, university research and the municipal
government, as well as civic philanthropy. The “translation” of the “procedural
complexity” behind these institutional transformations and their physical effects
manifested in inclusive public infrastructure is essential because they represent
critical alternatives to the way cities today tend to organize themselves, as well as
the unsustainable metropolitan growth they promote.
To substantiate this effort, we conducted interviews with dozens of individuals involved in Medellín’s political and civic processes, from the Mayor to social workers, from artists and academics to civic philanthropists, since what happened there was a complex process of negotiation and collaboration across institutions and publics. This exercise produced a new political language structured by a complex network of institutional relationships and dialogical processes with communities. We translated these stories and anecdotes, mapped them out and identified connections, tracing the ideas and tendencies across time and through diverse geographies, incrementally stitching them together and visualizing their complexity in the Medellín Diagram.

The Medellín Diagram demonstrates that the most effective urban interventions in the city today are not achieved by top-down logics of urban renewal, but by engaging the complexity of the existing real, mobilizing strategies of alteration and adaptation that benefit layered as opposed to tabula rasa approaches. This also involves intervening into critical proximities, exposing urban and community borders as sites of engagement, and operating at various scales simultaneously, while infiltrating existing institutional protocols, negotiating modest alterations, and being compelling enough to transform top-down urban policy and economy. A particular lesson here is the advancement of new forms of public communication, urban pedagogical processes that use art and culture as cognitive systems to enable communities to access the complexity of urban policy, activating the capacities of the bottom-up for political action.

We believe that among the most pressing crises today is the crisis of knowledge transfer between institutions, fields of specialization and publics. For this reason, our current work has engaged the complexity of transferring urban knowledge, from informal communities of practice to formal institutions and back, in the construction of the new political today. In this context, the story of Medellín helped us to clarify something essential to our own urban and political research: that an informal act in the city, whether through stealth spatial alterations, jurisdictional encroachment, or social behavior, does not have to stop at the small and symbolic gestural scale, but it can trickle upwards with enough self-assurance to construct a political process that can ultimately transform top-down policy. This journey from the bottom-up to the top-down is urgent today, and it necessitates a new political leadership. But these procedures need translation and facilitation, what we call “tactics of translation”: a deliberate effort to expose and visualize urban conflict as an operational and creative tool capable of re-appropriating the broken pieces of urbanization that have manifested in the space of the metropolis, the by-products of imposed, exclusionary political and economic urban recipes of privatization.

Strategies of Co-Existence: Informal Flows and the Cross-Border Citizen
Informality is conventionally understood as an economic concept, referring primarily to whether or not economic activity takes place within formal market processes. But Antanas Mockus, legendary former mayor of Bogotá, approaches informality in anthropological and sociological terms, helping us to think about the informal dimensions of social coordination and governance in the city. He insists that urban reform begins not with infrastructural intervention, but behavioural intervention at the level of norms. For Mockus, urban transformation is as much about changing patterns of public trust and social cooperation from the bottom up as it is about changing urban and environmental policy from the top down.

In collaboration with Mockus and his NGO, Corpovisionarios, the municipalities of San Diego and Tijuana and stakeholders from across the cross-border region, we have produced the Binational Citizenship Culture Survey. It is an instrument that measures what Mockus calls “citizenship culture” in San Diego and Tijuana. Corpovisionarios has applied the survey in 30 cities across Latin America, and recently in Europe, and has developed a database of comparative research. In our case, the survey is not a study of just one city but two, and not simply parallel surveys to compare their similarities and differences, but a survey of two cities intimately intertwined across a militarized wall that has been fortified over time as a federal bulwark against porosity. Our claim has always been that the wall ultimately cannot disrupt the bottom-up normative, social, economic and environmental flows that
define our region; and the purpose of the survey was to identify these informal flows to compel a new era of top-down cross-border municipal collaboration.

The survey ultimately provokes the idea of the “cross-border citizen”, whose conception of citizenship is organized around the shared values and social norms, the common interests and sense of mutual responsibility around which a new bi-national citizenship culture can be cultivated — beyond the arbitrary and formal jurisdictional boundaries that too rigidly define both cityhood and the politics of citizenship in the United States.

One of the most important lessons of Antanas Mockus’ administration in Bogotá is that it makes no sense to sign formal agreements among factions if citizens themselves don’t “interiorize” a new civic consciousness. This is precisely how we see our work. We are working with the mayors to build new relations of trust and cooperation from the top down, but we are primarily interested in identifying the informal dynamics that bind these two cities together, from the bottom up, through which a new regional, cross-border collective consciousness can emerge.

On Public Goods and Social Norms: Mockus and the legacy of Adam Smith
It has been central to our research that Mockus takes his place in a long tradition of social theory that focuses on the informal dynamics of social coordination, notably eighteenth century Scottish social theory and and its greatest voice, Adam Smith. Most people think of Smith as the father of free-market capitalism, and this interpretation is obviously not without good reason. Smith’s book The Wealth of Nations, published in 1776, is a manifesto of open markets and minimal states, where human beings are motivated primarily by self-interest — and that the social bonds among them are the product of cost-benefit calculation and nothing more.

The truth is that this conventional neoliberal interpretation of Smith neglects what he really said or why he said it. Smith in fact was a vicious critic of greedy capitalism, the commodification of human relationships, and the degradation of the working poor in early industrial capitalism. He was among the century’s most vocal critics of European slavery and empire — indeed, his fear of the state was rooted primarily in this, since state policy in the eighteenth century was too easily hijacked by the agendas of corrupt international trading companies like the East India Company.

The relevant insight here is that “social” — or “acceptable” — behaviour for Smith, and for Mockus, is essentially an internalization of one’s experiences moving through the world, a cultural artefact, that some have compared to a Freudian superego. As such, if you live in a society where violence is the norm, where racism and the degradation of human dignity are the norm, where criminality and gang violence is the norm, where violence against women is tolerated, where paying one’s taxes is perceived as optional, and natural resources like water are expendable, and so forth, then social interaction will not constrain the behaviour but will actually reinforce it.

Mockus and his approach to social norms and urban transformation must begin in the eighteenth century with Adam Smith.

In brief, Smith insisted that modern societies cohered after the dissolution of traditional forms of formal authority (kings, churches, static feudal hierarchy) because our relations with one another are regulated by the conventions and habits that emerge through informal social interface. His richly detailed empirical account of informal social coordination was contained in his book The Theory of Moral Sentiments of 1759, the book he wrote as a young man which nobody reads anymore. There Smith offered a brilliant theory about emergent sources of human cooperation and culture formation, a view that cognitive scientists and neuro-researchers today have confirmed with increasingly sophisticated diagnostic technologies in the lab.

We are interested in Smith’s theory of the informal social processes through which societies cohere, without the formal institutions of state coercion, how people in shared spaces discipline and regulate each other collectively through ordinary daily interaction and produce social norms; and how these norms are then transmitted, passed from each generation to the next through the infinite repetition of informal interfaces.

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It is here that an external normative vantage is required. This is precisely where formal, top-down norms became important for Smith — to provide an external and formal vantage and correction. In other words, Smith sought to bring social norms into harmony with what he called “moral” norms or standards. This distinction lies at the heart of Mockus’s method as well, and is the basis of so much of Coprovisionarios’ success. The greatest lesson of Mockus’ leadership is this: Social norms that degrade the integrity of human life need to be changed and replaced with moral norms that honour and respect human life. Meeting urban violence with stricter penalties will not work. Law and order solutions don’t interiorize new values, but community processes do.

A New Civic Imagination
What Antanas’ work demonstrates is that informal social norms, which emerge from the bottom up, can be reoriented at the urban scale through formal, top-down municipal intervention — political leadership with a new civic imagination to declare and perform emphatically the moral norms that should regulate our relations: that human life is sacred, that radical inequality is unjust, that adequate education and health are basic human rights, that gender violence is intolerable, and so forth — and in the case of our region, that human beings regardless of formal legal citizenship, and regardless of race and class, have dignity, deserve equal respect and basic quality of life.
The Political Economy of the Bottom-up: Informal Public Demands

An urgent challenge in our time, as the paradigm of private property has proven itself unsustainable in conditions of poverty, is to rethink existing norms of ownership. This means redefining urban development by amplifying the value of community participation: More than “owning” units of housing, residents, in collaboration with community-based agencies, can also co-own and co-manage the economic and social infrastructure around them. In other words, we must amplify the value of people’s participation in urban development, enhancing the role of communities in producing housing. We must envision housing configurations that elevate emergent local economies and new forms of sociability, allowing neighbourhoods to generate new markets “from the bottom up” (i.e., informal economies and densities that are usually off the radar of conventional top-down economic recipes), as well as to promote new models of affordability, with financing schemes that allow unconventional mixed uses. This has led our research in San Diego to focus on social and economic informality in marginalized immigrant neighbourhoods.

Take the example of two women responding to the child care scarcity in one of these border neighbourhoods, who rent a three-bedroom apartment and transform it into a day care facility, which in turn is recognized by a community-based organization that camouflages that activity, while supporting it with knowledge and economic resources, channelling and redirecting subsidies and other cash flows. Some will dismiss this sort of activity as “illegal”, but we would like to pause and think about the ubiquity and potential of scaling up these informal acts into new legal frameworks that elevate local-scale economic and social creativity. Let’s frame this agency and stealth knowledge as an operative tool to rethink economic development at local and small scales, and ultimately to help us reimagine typologies of housing and public space. For instance, how many of these informal neighbourhood-based practices, such as local food production, day care, elder care, arts production and informal education, etc. can be translated, evaluated, and ultimately politically represented?

A recurring theme in our work at the U.S.-Mexico border has been, in fact, to investigate other modalities of economy, other policy frameworks that can transcend urbanisms of global consumption towards urbanizations of local production. The key issues here are how to mobilize the redistribution of resources, and mediate top-down and bottom-up dynamics; how to enable local communities to benefit from their own modes of production. Can a neighbourhood-based urbanization yield new typologies of public housing as the catalytic infrastructure for urban development today? In this respect, we have argued that surplus value is not necessarily evil; what is appalling is the way it has been hoarded by the very few at the expense of the many. We believe that the task of any urban and political practice today is to reorganize, redistribute, and redirect that surplus, so that it acquires a social mandate and takes on value that is not only economic but also social. We also believe that to address issues of social justice today, we must enable the redistribution of resources but also the redistribution of knowledges.

For instance, can the knowledge of the developer be appropriated as an instrument to construct community? In essence: Can the developer’s pro forma be framed as a site of experimentation today, where we can aggregate the hidden value of informal economy, of sweat equity, of collaboration, and of new political representation framed by social protection systems? How to intervene in its organizational logics of financing and resources, elevating the social and economic contingencies found in informal urbanization? We believe that a new political economy of urbanization will be found not in the formal systems of architecture or urban planning, but in the construction of new socio-economic and political frameworks, within which the “informal public” can have not only a symbolic but an operational role, and where new aesthetic paradigms of building can be generated.

Informal Public Demands:

We maintain that urban transformation begins at the social and behavioural level, and requires intervening into the dysfunctional and hierarchical social norms that situate relations in civil society. Only then can governance and physical intervention produce meaningful and sustainable change. As such, our call for an informal public begins with a set of normative demands, followed by demands for more democratic and collaborative forms of governance, culminating in a set of policy demands focused on the equitable physical transformation of the city.

— To transform cultural practices of social exclusion and the corresponding denigration of public goods by cultivating new urban norms of human dignity and equality, and to shame their violation.
— To advance a language of “a right to the city” to stimulate a new sense of possibility in communities long marginalized from the planning agendas of today’s cities.
To enable more inclusive and meaningful systems of political representation and civic engagement at the scale of neighbourhoods, tactically re-calibrating individual and collective interests.

To produce new forms of local governance, along with the social protection systems that provide guarantees for marginalized communities, and to protect their right to control their own modes of production and share the profits of urbanization to prevent gentrification.

To rethink existing models of property by redefining affordability and the value of social participation, augmenting the role of communities in co-producing housing, and enabling a more inclusive idea of ownership.

To mobilize social networks into new spatial and economic infrastructures that benefit local communities in the long term, beyond the short term problem solving of private developers or institutions of charity.

To sponsor mediating agencies that can curate the interface between top-down, government-led infrastructural support and the creative bottom-up intelligence and sweat equity of communities and activists.

To close the gap between the abstraction of large-scale planning logics and the specificity of everyday practices.

To challenge the autonomy of buildings, often conceived as self-referential systems, benefiting the one-dimensionality of the object and indifferent to socio-economic temporalities embedded in the city. How to engage instead the complex temporalization of space found in informal urbanization’s management of time, people, spaces, and resources?

To question exclusionary recipes of land use, understanding zoning not as the punitive tool that prevents socialization but instead as a generative tool that organizes and anticipates local social and economic activity at the scale of neighbourhoods.

To politicize density, no longer measured as an abstract amount of objects per acre but as an amount of socio-economic exchanges per acre.

To retrofit the large with the small. The micro-social and economic contingencies of the informal will transform the homogeneous largeness of official urbanization into more sustainable, plural, and complex environments.

To elevate the incremental low-cost layering of urban development found in informal urbanization in order to generate new paradigms of public infrastructure, beyond the dominance of private development alone and its exorbitant budgets.

To reimagine exclusionary logics that shape jurisdiction. Conventional government protocols give primacy to the abstraction of administrative boundaries over the social and environmental boundaries that informality negotiates as devices to construct community.

To challenge the idea of public space as an ambiguous and neutral place of beautification. We must move the discussion from the neutrality of the institutional public to the specificity of urban rights.

To layer public space with protocols, designing not only physical systems but also the collaborative socio-economic and cultural programming and management to assure accessibility and sustainability in the long term.

The Informal Public is the site from which to generate “other” ways of constructing the city; and its role today is to mediate a two-way journey, between top-down and bottom-up dynamics: in one direction, how specific, bottom-up urban alterations by creative acts of citizenship can have enough resolution and political agency to trickle upward to transform top-down institutional structures; and, in the other direction, how top-down resources can reach sites of marginalization, transforming normative ideas of infrastructure by absorbing the creative intelligence embedded in informal dynamics. This critical interface between top-down and bottom-up resources and knowledges is essential at a time when the extreme left and the extreme right, bottom-up activism and top-down pro-development, neoliberal urban agendas, all join forces and converge in their mistrust of government. A fundamental role of the informal public in shaping the agenda for the future of the city is to press for new forms of governance, seeking a new role for progressive policy, a more efficient, transparent, inclusive, and collaborative form of government. For these reasons, one of the most important sites of intervention in our time is the opaque, exclusionary, and dysfunctional bureaucracy that characterizes many cities in the world, and the restoration of the linkages between government, social networks, and cultural institutions to reorient the surplus value of urbanization to benefit not merely the private but primarily a public imagination.

1 Our great thanks to Helge Mooshammer and Peter Mörtensböck for their partnership and support; to Alejandro Echeverri, Jean-Philippe Vassal and our 23 respondents for their enthusiastic participation; and to our editorial assistant and project manager, Aaron Cotkin, for his hard work and patient dedication to this project. Thanks also to Ximena Cofradela and Natalia Castañe Cardenas in Medellín and Marcos Garcia Rojo in Paris for helping to coordinate our exchanges with Echeverri and Vassal; and to Jose Encamilla who assisted with translation.


3 The Diagram was first presented in April 2014 in the Medellín Museum of Modern Art on the occasion of the 7th UN Habitat World Urban Forum, which was hosted in Medellín to showcase the remarkable urban transformations that had occurred there. It was co-produced in collaboration with Echeverri and graphic designer Matthias Goerlich of Studio Matthias Goerlich, Frankfurt. See http://medellin-diagram.com/en/
The Informal Public Demands a New Conversation: A Virtual Roundtable

Provocateurs: Teddy Cruz and Fonna Forman
Interlocutors: Jean Philippe Vassal and Alejandro Echeverri

The critical reflections on the informal articulated in the beginning of this chapter served as provocations for a dialogue with two interlocutors, Alejandro Echeverri and Jean-Philippe Vassal, whose work on urbanism and architecture have opened new perspectives on informality.

Echeverri is Co-Founder and Director of URBAM, the Center for Urban and Environmental Studies at KAPIT University. He was Director of Urban Projects for Medellín, Colombia in the administration of Mayor Sergio Fajardo, where he led a project of “Social Urbanism” and coordinated many interventions into informal settlements. His work within informal urban contexts has influenced architects and urban planners across the world. Jean-Philippe Vassal is a Paris-based architect whose renowned work with partner Anne Lacaton on public space, housing and urban planning, as well as new bottom-up approaches to rethink the economy of building, is, to our mind, among the most powerful architectural expressions of informal spatial dynamics today, opening new aesthetic paradigms that embrace everyday practices.

What follows is a set of conversations with Echeverri and Vassal about the relation between their research-based practices and informal urbanization, centred around seven provocations which are critical to our own understanding of the informal. The conversations with Vassal and Echeverri were transcribed, and distributed to a diverse set of respondents, renowned practitioners and thinkers who represent a variety of practical and theoretical disciplines — architecture, art and curation, urban studies, social and political theory, economics, journalism and activism. We asked all respondents to react to the essential first provocation, locating “the informal”. We then distributed the remaining provocations among the respondents.


The following seven provocations framed the conversation:

1. Operating definition
What does the informal consist of for you (in the context of urbanization and otherwise)? What would be an operating definition for you?

2. Relation to the top-down
How do formal and informal dynamics interact, converge, diverge, etc. and how do you feel about the formal-informal dialectic (keeping in mind that these terms are often relative to context and that they often blur)?

3. Impact on practice
What operative role has the “informal” played in your own practice? And can you recall a moment or set of conditions that prompted a shift in your practice in order to address the informal?

4. Informal as praxis and procedure
In our introduction, we emphasize that the informal is not just an aesthetic category but primarily a set of procedures — a praxis. Can you comment on the informal as praxis and its procedures?

5. The informal aesthetic
Nevertheless, are there aesthetic potentialities that can be addressed?

6. Transformative urban impact
How can informal dynamics (i.e., informal economies, spatial organization and social networks) transform our thinking about infrastructure, democracy and inclusive urbanization?

7. Scaling up
In what ways can the contingent role of the informal at small scales be scaled up?
1 OPERATING DEFINITION

What does the informal consist of for you? (In the context of urbanization and otherwise)

What would be an operating definition?

Architects Alejandro Echeverri (Medellin, Colombia) and Jean-Philippe Vassal (Paris, France) in conversation with Teddy Cruz and Fonna Forman (San Diego, USA)

> Alejandro Echeverri

Teddy Cruz / Fonna Forman: Even though many of us resist static definitions, what does the informal mean to you from an operational standpoint? What is the relationship of the informal to urbanization?

Alejandro Echeverri: In the context of Medellin, our city’s most interesting story has been written already, and it has been written by informal processes. For the most part, the informal dictates our reality. In Medellin and other Latin American cities, 50 per cent of society does not follow the norm. And it is not optional. It is a concrete reality. It is a response to urgency. These peripheral processes are what we call “informal”. But this is a very general and vast definition. We would need to analyze it and dissect it further in order to really come up with a definition for the informal.

AE: That which exists outside of our reality lies within the norm of formal economic processes. And I think that there is a second issue that is related to this. The difficulty behind defining “the informal” comes from the preconceptions and stigmas that many of us have of the term. The answers to these questions will vary depending on whom you ask or under what circumstances you ask them. For a lot of people and social groups with whom we collaborate, their “everyday” universe is the one they live in. For them, there is no differentiation or stigmatization between the formal and informal. The space where they carry out their everyday lives is their real world. I think that we need to have a more “transparent” perspective and forego many preconceptions in order to be able to define what informal processes are.

> Jean-Philippe Vassal

Jean-Philippe Vassal: We are curious and interested in the informal. A long time ago after graduating, I stayed for five years in Nigeria. It was the first time I came upon the question of the informal economy and the informal city. Ninety per cent of the city I was in, North of the Sahara, for example, was informal, so it was at this time that I began asking how the informal could transform our way of thinking about architecture, and perhaps other fields as well, such as urbanism as we know it today, which is, for me, problematic in the way it is currently practiced.

TC / FF: Do you have a working definition of the informal and what you mean when you come upon it?

JPV: To me, the informal is unpredictable. We cannot control it but we can partake in it. Its outcome is unpredictable yet often surprising. It is not defined by rules, regulations or systems. It heavily relies on improvisation, which is about “being alive”. It is a difficult concept to define.

Respondents

Marty Chen: The “informal” can be found in multiple domains: transactions, relationships and institutions; economic, social and political. My work, and that of the W_RGO network I coordinate, focuses on the informal in the economic realm and, more specifically, in labour and product markets. One of the core functions of the W_RG network is to improve the measurement of informality in labour force and in other economic statistics. To do this, we needed a clear and comprehensive concept and definition of informality.

With the International Labour Organization, the International Conference of Labour Statisticians, and the International Expert Group on Informal Sector Statistics, W_RGO has developed an official international statistical definition of informal employment that includes the self-employed in informal enterprises (i.e., unincorporated small or unregistered enterprises) and the wage-employed in informal jobs (i.e., jobs without employer contributions to social protection). So defined, informal wage workers may be hired by informal enterprises, formal firms or households. So defined, the informal workforce represents between half and 80 per cent of the non-agricultural workforce in developing countries.

In brief, there are three related official definitions of economic informality which are often used imprecisely and interchangeably: the informal sector refers to the production and employment that takes place in unincorporated, small, or unregistered enterprises; informal employment refers to employment without legal and social protection — both inside and outside the informal sector; and the informal economy refers to all units, activities, and workers so defined and the output from them. Together, they form the broad base of the workforce and the economy, both nationally and globally.
We conventionally think of informal economies, or informal quarters, as illegal entities. In this perspective, any form of thought that doesn’t correspond to the maximizing norm will inevitably be rendered informal, and therefore illegal. I prefer to look at cities beyond this typically Modernist dichotomy. We should go back to the moratorium and start again. Once it is accepted that housing is a right, we should look at urban forms in which people can have the space to build their dwellings based on a set of shared values. Therefore, the problem is not one of defining what is formal, or informal, but rather one of understanding how we can conceive of an urban form that can grow organically with the needs of all its inhabitants.

Hou Hanru: We often tend to romanticize informality because we are getting fed up with our formal lives — with formalized life in our specific spaces, that is, in the “West”, where everything seems to be regulated and formalized by textual laws. By calling the “other” “informal”, Western “theories” eventually reveal how Western modernity has turned upside-down when looking at basic rights, such as the right to housing. If it is true that people on this planet turned upside-down when looking at basic rights, such as the right to housing, then things can be easily turned upside-down, too. In the middle of the cities gaining access to public information. This gap between the perceptions of those inhabiting a territory and those in government agencies monitoring that territory led us to develop a platform to equalize these two ways of producing information. By disclosing public information and by amplifying citizens’ voices, we seek to avoid the hierarchization between the formal and the informal.

Emiliano Gandolfi: informal adjective (ˌɪnˈfɔrməl) having a friendly and relaxed quality suited for ordinary use when you are relaxing of language relaxed in tone not suited for serious or official speech and writing (Merriam-Webster Dictionary)

Over the past decades, we have been looking at cities in terms of dichotomies. We have directed our sensibility to an understanding of urban, economic, and mental structures that are presented as the correct ways of organizing our societies. Beyond these ideas of order, there is disorder — life that doesn’t fit into these schemes. Yet things can be easily turned upside-down when looking at basic rights, such as the right to housing. If it is true that people on this planet should have the right to exist, they should equally have the right to housing. If it is true that people on this planet turned upside-down when looking at basic rights, such as the right to housing, then things can be easily turned upside-down, too. In the middle of the cities gaining access to public information. This gap between the perceptions of those inhabiting a territory and those in government agencies monitoring that territory led us to develop a platform to equalize these two ways of producing information. By disclosing public information and by amplifying citizens’ voices, we seek to avoid the hierarchization between the formal and the informal.

The informal as a new regulatory system exists within the formal purview of the state and, thus, evades taxation and form and perception. It is an indigenous urbanism that is interpreted modernity in its own way through this process of dereification recognize that the human body is connected to a natural landscape has been represented by art across the centuries as the vocation of place. This integration of the environmental systems that surround them, underpins the environmental thinking of place, and thus, evades the conceptualization of the informal as a thing that can easily be separated from the formal. Indeed, we are not looking at an overlapping of different systems but an interesting hybridization of those systems. And over time, because every situation and space has interpreted modernity in its own way through this process of dereification, this has somehow challenged the definition of the formal and the informal.

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In the context of contemporary art, institutions have for some time been trying to be open to this so-called non-Western world — the other. Very often, samples of the informal are transported from remote places into our formalized space. This emphasizes certain aspects of those so-called informal things while taking away the actual vitality of those activities. However, there is one little aspect that we may have overlooked. Informality is not a thing that can easily be separated from the formal. Indeed, we are not looking at an overlapping of different systems but an interesting hybridization of those systems. And over time, because every situation and space has interpreted modernity in its own way through this process of dereification, this has somehow challenged the definition of the formal and the informal.

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In the context of contemporary art, institutions have for some time been trying to be open to this so-called non-Western world — the other. Very often, samples of the informal are transported from remote places into our formalized space. This emphasizes certain aspects of those so-called informal things while taking away the actual vitality of those activities. However, there is one
But being informal is not essentially about economics. It's not primarily about rational action and individual profit and loss. In fact, it's not a really market phenomenon at all. And it's certainly not criminal or out of the ordinary.

An unlicensed street market is at root a collective—a group of merchants figuring out how to grow their business together, cooperating and competing at the same time. Similarly, a squatter community (or as some wags say, an "informal settlement" or "slum") is, at least at its inception, a cooperative—a group of families determined to work together to house themselves in a world that otherwise denies them the possibility of having a home. A supply chain that, at every link, avoids customs duties and taxes is, in essence, a group of people who, through relationships and friendships nurtured across national boundaries, find a way to achieve trust outside the law.

What we call informality is an upsurge of spontaneous joint action. This arena of human affairs is not dangerous and disorganized. Rather, it is governed by shared customs and the work is, in the main, done with honour.

So the merchants in Alaba International Market in Lagos may ask you for a bribe (they might call it "showing appreciation"), but will never simply rip you off. And the street DVD dealers of Brazil and Paraguay are upfront about selling knock-offs, though they may insist that they are super high quality "real copies". And the electronics wholesalers in Guangzhou might sell you a thousand useless fake-brand-name flash drives if they don’t know you—but if you come recommended by someone they trust then the rules of the game are different.

Our system has difficulty acknowledging this primacy of camaraderie and shared purpose. The rich don’t need these things. They can get everything they desire with their money. Those in the global majority, however, don’t have these things. They can get everything they desire with their community. Community is their launching pad, solidarity their potential equalizer, the commons their shared luxury. Community is their launching pad, solidarity their potential equalizer, the commons their shared stomping ground—and this is what informality is.

Kyoung Park: In urbanization, the informal has been touted as a bottom-up movement that could counter the top-down dictate of "master plans", which have dominated the globe since the beginning of modernity. Extending into or influenced by, difficult economic plights, the informal also symbolizes the revival of participatory democracy under the omnipresence of neoliberal policies (which are a marriage of convenience between governments and corporations that merge austerity politics with an unregulated capitalist economy). Here, the informal is associated with the informal as a rejection of localism within formalizing globalization, with the former representing the interests of self-sustaining communities and the latter insisting on a totalizing network system that is orchestrated globally.

A specific example of this is the international food industry that ships agricultural products across the globe, forcing all of us to consume imported food, thereby diminishing the diversity of local production and distribution as well as extinguishing indigenous cuisine practices that historically reflected our environments.

But, is the informal really the opposite of the formal? And do informal spaces only occur in the informal sector and never in the formal sector? Furthermore, is the informal a true remedy for all the ills of the formal, or is the informal just another master narrative of the formal? Can the two co-exist, and should they? Or, is the informal just another master narrative of the formal that will eventually incorporate the formal. Yes, the informal and the formal can, and indeed should, co-exist, but only within the spheres of the informal.

So what are your answers to these questions? And I am asking you very informally.

Alessandro Petti: Formal and informal should not be understood as necessarily oppositional definitions, but rather as two different yet complementary concepts, because one cannot exist without the other. Palestinian refugee camps are formal and informal. When they first appeared after the 1948 Nakba, they were conceived as an emergency establishment of the massive expulsion of almost the entire Palestinian population of that time. Today, there are some 60 refugee camps located in Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and the occupied Palestinian territories, with some five million refugees. These camps have been set up by state bodies following rather schematic and formalized layouts, much like military camps. The grid is a guiding principle for the establishment of most of the refugee camps, with a clear separation between the United Nations compounds with their humanitarian services and the rest divided into plots with tents assigned to refugee families. A short-term form of architecture, they are not built to last.
However, more than 65 years have passed, and the camps are no longer made of tents. Over the military formal grid laid out to control and manage the camp, refugees have built an informal architecture that constitutes the RNA of a new city. Today, it is hardly possible to recognize the old military grid, on top of which refugees have built new structures and spaces that follow a completely different logic.

Paradoxically, the prolonged exceptional temporality of the refugee camps has created a new spatial condition in which formal and informal are strictly related: on one side, the United Nations with its top down bureaucratic and static structure and, on the other side, the exiled communities of refugees with their transformative everyday spatial practices.

Instead of trying to oppose the formal with the informal, we should rather see them as operating at the same time, always co-present. In this delicate equilibrium resides the future of our cities.

Marjetica Potrč: The informal means accepting difference and otherness — in people, architecture, economic structures, etc. It is a form of tolerance. If formality is a box with defined sides, then the informal is the openings in the box. It means experiencing something you never encountered before, maybe never even thought about before. Something unexpected can happen — so it is full of hope, but also scary and foreign for politicians, economists and some accustomed to a more stable society. The informal thrives in dynamic instability. Is this chaos? Not at all.

When I worked on the Dry Toilet project in a Caracas barrio in 2005, we soon realized the barrio was a well-regulated structure. It was just regulated differently from the formal city. Instead of written rules, the barrio had oral ones. Community meetings were regularly scheduled, and issues were discussed and decisions made. The barrio had libraries and hospitals, only it couldn’t recognize them at first; nothing told me this was a hospital. Here was public space in the making, not something given, which is how I understood public space before I came to Caracas. Most importantly, the barrios were built by the residents themselves. They speak of the urgency of the people who settle in the barrio, and of the importance of the barrios built by the residents themselves as the spontaneous emergence of new paradigmatic social forms beyond the control and reach of global power.

The impetus to refuse the reciprocity of formal and informal stems from a contemporary ideology which is focused on finding "safe" ways of living, which does not fit neatly into a fixed picture of how people should live. No homeboys are hanging out in the gated community; in this formula, "hanging out" is equated with lower class. But informal knowledge is something any human being can and should acquire by loosening up. This is why I reject the equation, particular strong in the urban domain, that informal = poor.

In another example, it was the group of the "invaders" of Paris who actually built the church they were forbidden to build. When I asked the church steeple in France, he said, the parishioners wrote to Paris asking the state to do the repair. In America, off the church steeple in France, he said, the parishioners knew the congregation got together to repair it themselves. We found the country replete with the many collective action in caste associations — to provide legal services, hostels near schools, etc., but most importantly, to participate in politics. The overwhelmingly more numerous lower castes brought about a social revolution in India via caste associations — by winning elections that put their people in power and using that power to gain respect, resources and benefits. (We described this at length in our first book The Modernity of Tradition, Part I.)

Saskia Sassen: We need to expand the familiar definition. The city itself generates informal knowledge because it tells us when something does not work (see my essay “Does the City Have Speech?” in Public Culture 25, no. 2 (2013): 209–221). But we do not listen or no longer understand its language.

Richard Sennett: For me, the “informal” is a structured process. By that, I mean it is a way of loosening the functional relations between people, making it possible for them to benefit from surprises and accidents, or in another from, appreciating the differences between people which cannot be codified. The structural part of this definition means setting up architectural systems or social relations so that there is a loose fit between form and function. Nothing new is going to happen if the building or the social relationship is tightly defined.

I say this because I do not think “informality” should be pinned only to the way poor people live, as a label for how they make do lacking the resources for a more defined, established way of life. The virtues of informality apply to everyone, or should apply. What is true, in terms of hierarchy and class, is that privileged people can refuse to formalize, excluding a group below because it does not fit neatly into a fixed picture of how people should live. No homeboys are hanging out in the gated communityten; in this formula, “hanging out” is equated with lower class. But informal knowledge is something any human being can and should acquire by loosening up. This is why I reject the equation, particular strong in the urban domain, that informal = poor.

StealthUrban: Informal is a charged term that we do not use with ease, as informality expresses a sense of betrayal of an expected order. It is mainly applied to acts that are of a fine grain and which make an impact only when amended. Once you realize that the given order in cities does not provide existential conditions for all citizens, the informal can suddenly be understood as a domain of negotiation and democratization of space, even if it is unsolicited and often short-lived.

Jeanne van Heeswijk: For us — working on the Freehouse project in the Afrikaanderwijk, a neighbourhood characterized by social and economic marginalization in the south of Rotterdam and the first neigbourhood in the Netherlands to have a majority of residents with a migratory background — informality is about constantly renegotiating different urgencies and finding ways to create urban unions so that different forms of livelihood can come into being. These cannot be found in the dichotomy between the formal and informal but in constantly walking the fault line between these two terms, working with ruptures in order to form alliances that can create greater solidarity. New forms of commonality and cooperation come into being through setting up chains of production that can generate localized social, economic and cultural activities that can operate on various scale levels. This collective production is about supporting the emergence of everyday informal practices while at the same time rooting them in stronger networks.

As atelier d’architecture autogéréé, we understand the notion of the informal in direct relation with that of “tactics”. Being tactical is a way to trespass the prescribed and the official and to maintain informality at work. We defined our work as “urban tactics”, referring to our engaged activity in the urban realm that encourages inhabitants to re-appropriate vacant land in the city and transform it into self-managed space.

Tactics, according to De Certeau, work with time and are opportunistic in their method; they do not “plan”, but use their own deviousness and the element of surprise to get things done. Atelier d’architecture autogéréé’s tactical urbanism is different and, perhaps, in conflict with traditional urban planning. We do not “plan” but “act”, sometimes without permission and against the rules that we consider inappropriate or unfair. This subversion involves inventiveness, time and passion. Tactics survive through their mobility, says De Certeau, and from this point of view, all of our spatial devices involve forms of temporariness and mobility: temporary occupations, mobile architectures, dismantling constructions.

We have been working with a particular type of spaces that we have termed “urban interstices”: urban wastelands, vacant plots, abandoned buildings, neglected public spaces—all spaces that have so far eluded or delayed, perhaps only for a short time, land development programmes. We have negotiated the temporary use of these interstices, proposing activities that were not inscribed in urban regulations: gardening, recycling, cooking. Space is a high-value resource in big cities where land is expensive and scarce. Temporary use also implies that projects have a short lifespan and will disappear after a while. In the case of the ECObox project, in order to prevent this, we have produced mobile spatial devices to allow the project to move on to new locations whenever a site is no longer available. Many users have followed the project during its successive reinstallations. New users living nearby have also joined the project with each relocation. In this way, power structures have been continually questioned and revised: new assemblies of users have been formed, and new governance rules negotiated with each new location.

We need to resist an urge that has become prevalent in urban theory that borders do not exist, that they are dissolved by the “flows” of globalization. But for us, working in a border territory, while aspiring to a borderless reality, we are confronted daily with a concrete division materialized as formal jurisdictional power that disrupts the ordinary flows of human life, polarizing wealth and poverty. Of course, one need not consider extreme cases like ours, where divisions have been physicalized, to understand this point. Borders, like power itself, are often invisible and embedded within our norms and beliefs, our practices and our space.

So, in essence, we want to retain the distinction between the formal and the informal, but also be critical of it, which also has inherent value.

What are your thoughts on the relation between formal and informal?

AE: I think that one of the urgent spaces for innovation in the near future is the ability to build mediation—spaces of contact—where these dynamics, top-down and bottom-up, formal and informal, converge. But it has also been a tragic story. The obstacles to making these mediating spaces possible are the large distances resulting from preconceptions and stigmatization between one universe and the other, as well as the different paces at which they work, which call for different rates of flexibility. This has made it very difficult to construct these spaces, but there is no doubt that the key to approaching this question lies in dialogue as well as in the construction of potentially collaborative processes.

I think that one of the quintessential themes is the transparency of processes. It has to do with the concept of trust and the concept of humility. It is not easy to step down into a land where action is a collaborative effort and generates a conversation in a common language. Herein lies one of the most beautiful and difficult, yet
exciting, tasks that exist in these convergent spaces — developing a new process of communication. The task that we all have — you, us — is to figure out how to build these spaces of collaboration between diametrically different dynamics that work at different paces and have different needs. However, in the end we all opt for a better place, a better city, and a common answer. But the ways in which these dynamics develop are completely different. The question consists in how to build that mediating space where different modes of collaboration and points of convergence can multiply. I would think that this is the challenge between the formal and the informal.

>Jean-Philippe Vassal

**TC/FF:** The reason we admire your work so much is that you might be one of the few, if not the only, architects who through design strategies involving space and the political economy of construction, have been able to frame the contingency of the “everyday” through a formal language. You accept informality and then frame and promote it architecturally, which is a fantastic way of speaking of the encounter between the top-down and bottom-up, and how they come together. Through our work with the informal at the San Diego-Tijuana border we have been researching urbanization as a phenomenon of top-down institutions and processes interacting with bottom up dynamics. In your previous response, regarding definitions, you mentioned the limitations of the top-down approach to urbanization because it neglects a more improvisational, bottom-up agency and community participation in the shaping of cities. So, in fact you refer here to a collision between top-down urban planning and bottom-up social intelligence. Could you speak to this?

**JPV:** There is a complementary question between the formal and informal and it is interesting to play with this situation because, contrary to the formal, the quality of the informal is reactive. It is quick and intuitive. The formal, on the other hand, takes time to control and organize. There is a complementary game between these two situations that we can play as architects, which is exciting. We try to play with it in terms of economy, which is, today, perhaps the most interesting material. In today’s urban situation and capacities, it is no longer about traditional materials, but improvisational, bottom-up agency and community participation in the shaping of cities. So, what do we need to catch up with these experiences on the ground? These processes, or modes of existence, produce their own set of rules according to which they are to be conceived, judged, expanded, and reproduced. We provisionally call them “paraformal” — a term with which we are trying to address these dynamics that are not against something (the formal) but cannot be described as an exception from the rule either. So we use the preposition “para”, which in Latin means both through and towards, to describe the iterations, trajectories and complex processes where the speed of organization and unexpected interconnection but also the steadiness of habits operate in a different way than they do in the case of the state and government agencies. This can take the form of inhabiting a site while making your own infrastructure, of squatting in order to gain access to citizenship rights, and so on.

**TC/FF:** While many argue that we need to transcend the distinction between formal and the informal, we have been trying to convey that they must be preserved as categories most often in conflict with each other. At the same time, we are interested in negotiating the coexistence of the formal and informal, as we seek solutions to persistent socio-economic inequality in our cities. How do you believe we can discover more constructive interfaces between these realms?

**JPV:** When you work with the informal, you work with life. You work closely with people. At first we were interested in the question of housing, one of the most essential questions in architecture. Housing involves taking care of people living inside a space. Housing is not only about a house, flats, or villas. Housing involves the entire city. The city is your house. It is more than just museums, banks, or commercial centres (malls). We push the definition of housing because it places each inhabitant in the middle of the question. If you consider this, you can see that traditional urban planning is totally obsolete. If we consider democracy as the meeting point between architecture and society, then democracy is non-existent, because we are still producing urbanism like we are in the nineteenth century. In these last 30 years, urban planning has become more and more blocked and frozen. There were many more experiments that addressed these questions in the 1970s and the 1980s. We can look at the work of Yona Friedman, for instance, to revisit these questions of the formal/informal distinction and participatory urbanization. He argues, for instance, that participation is not the best word to describe this. Improvisation and using the energy and creativity of the people as a starting point are far more important.

Respondents

Mauricio Corbalan: In our context, “informal” does not provide a good description of the dynamics it pretends to address. We can say that there is an incorrect categorization process occurring when it shows up. This opposes the formal and the informal as separate worlds, when in fact there is a vast grey and contested area where many different collectives try to institute their own practices and languages amidst a state of uncertainty. Nowadays, urban ecologies are hybrid worlds where is not easy to trace a clear bifurcation between state, society and nature, or between what is local and global; to describe these entanglements, we need to avoid the false conflicts that signify these practices in only one way.

So what do we need to catch up with these experiences on the ground? These processes, or modes of existence, produce their own set of rules according to which they are to be conceived, judged, expanded, and reproduced. We provisionally call them “paraformal” — a term with which we are trying to address these dynamics that are not against something (the formal) but cannot be described as an exception from the rule either. So we use the preposition “para”, which in Latin means both through and towards, to describe the iterations, trajectories and complex processes where the speed of organization and unexpected interconnection but also the steadiness of habits operate in a different way than they do in the case of the state and government agencies. This can take the form of inhabiting a site while making your own infrastructure, of squatting in order to gain access to citizenship rights, and so on.

Rahul Mehrotra: I think that rather than in relation to context, the blur between informal and formal happens, or does not happen, when you apply the lens of different disciplines. I think, in legal terms, the blur is probably more black and white than in terms of urban form where this blur is physical and often hard to differentiate. We often use the aesthetic bias and this is misleading — because what often looks like the informal city is not illegal but rather merely the landscape of poverty! I am personally more interested to extract from this what would be useful for us as designers and could be made operational to give design and planning agency. I think informality presents a compelling vision that potentially allows us to better understand the changing roles of people and spaces in urban society. The increasing concentration of global flows has exacerbated inequalities and the spatial
3 IMPACT ON PRACTICE

What operative role has the informal played in your own work? And can you recall a moment or a set of conditions that prompted a shift in your practice in order to address the informal?

Alejandro Echeverri

TC/FF: Let us talk about how the role of the informal has impacted your practice. Do you recall any particular moment in which certain conditions of urban informality produced a change in your thinking and procedures in relation to your own practice? A major topic for us in this chapter of a book on informality is how a variety of practices, from architecture to art, to theory and activism, redefine themselves in contexts of informality.

Can you say more about the transformative impact that the informal has had on your architectural practice?

AE: Yes. It might not sound quite right in the translation but in my case, I have been “screwed” from the moment I was born. What I am trying to say is that I was born in Medellín in the middle of such a historic yet tragic moment, where the city was presented to us in such a violent way. There is segregation and other harsh problems to deal with in the terrains of informality in our city. So, I have experienced this in different ways throughout my entire life. What happens, though, is that sometimes we cannot see this or do not want to see it. In my case, I came to slowly understand what this city was about through literary works, such as those by Victor Gaviria, or the book No Nacimos Pa’ Semilla by Antonio Salazar, which exposed this other reality and “language” to me. It was through this immersion, from having an intellectual perspective in trying to understand this other world, that I started working in the university, attempting to deal with the problems found in the North of Medellín—problems from which I have learned immensely and that have allowed me to build a more hybrid practice. I have gone from being an architect with a classic architectural training, call it more impermeable or narrow from an architectural perspective, to an architect that understands that the key to working with the city and its people has to do with building and generating more permeable, malleable, and porous processes and spatial systems that are able to incorporate a more trans-disciplinary work in its own process. To me, this is one of the great lessons that has allowed us to recognize and work with the whole spectrum of the informal in Medellín, where there must be a foundation in process and collaborative spaces in order to come up with answers and where the architect’s tools become valuable.

Jean-Philippe Vassal

TC/FF: Do you remember when the informal began to inform your practice? Was there a turning point or shift away from your formal education where you came into contact with something that made you realize your practice needed to shift?
informal market worlds

activists, researchers, and development professionals who are trying to earn an honest living against great odds. Yet the informal economy was stigmatized in mainstream economic theory and policy as illegal or even criminal. Yet to secure their livelihoods, the urban working poor need adequate housing, basic infrastructure services, and affordable, accessible public transportation. But as cities around the world begin to modernize, to invest in large infrastructure projects, and to privatize public land and services, urban informal livelihoods are often undermined or destroyed.

respondents

Marty Chen: Throughout my career, I have focused on the working poor, especially women: as a field worker and organizer in rural Bangladesh in the 1970s, as an activist-practitioner in India during the 1980s, as a researcher and teacher at Harvard University since 1987, and as a researcher and practitioner with the WIEGO network since 1997. When I joined Harvard University, I realized that I needed to frame my experience and knowledge under an academic rubric: the obvious choice was the “informal economy” as most of the working poor in developing countries are informally employed. But I soon discovered that the informal economy was stigmatized in mainstream economic theory and policy as illegal or even criminal. Yet I know that most of the working poor in the informal economy are trying to earn an honest living against great odds.

So, in 1997, I co-founded the WIEGO (Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing) network with activists, researchers, and development professionals who shared my concern that the working poor in the informal economy, especially women, are not understood, valued, or supported in policy circles or by the international development community. The WIEGO network seeks to improve the status of the working poor in the informal economy through stronger organizations, improved statistics and research, and informed understanding of informal workers and their contributions to society and the economy, and by creating an enabling environment. We seek most fundamentally to increase the voice of informal workers, to put a human face on the informal workforce, and to bridge the ground reality of informal workers and mainstream debates and policies.

To address this urban challenge, the WIEGO network and our partners began a global initiative to promote urban planning and policies that are more inclusive of the urban working poor. What do urban informal workers need from cities? Some of their needs are sector-specific: home-based producers need basic infrastructure services for their homes-cum-workplaces, street vendors need a secure place to vend in a good location, and waste pickers need access to waste and the right to bid for solid waste management contracts. Other needs are common across sectors: all urban informal workers want to live and work in central locations, not on the periphery of cities; and they need affordable services, including health and education services; water, sanitation, and electricity services at their homes and workplaces; and transport between their homes and workplaces. They also want to be recognized for their contributions to cities and the local economy and to be integrated into urban planning and local economic development. Most fundamentally, the urban working poor want to have a voice in decisions that affect their lives and livelihoods.

MAP Office: We encountered the informal when researching the newly built infrastructure of the Pearl River Delta (PRD), and especially the superhighway between Guangzhou and Shenzhen, for the first Rotterdam Architecture Biennale, Mobility, held at the Netherlands Architecture Institute in 2005. Serving as a primary link between the factories and the port of Hong Kong, the highway is an efficient piece of urban planning in a booming region. Underneath this superhighway, we came across a massive open market that stood in stark contrast to the planned environment. Located in Songgan, halfway between Shenzhen and Guangzhou, this market was used by a multitude of workers to develop new social networks and was a perfect example of informal urbanism—a place for commodities to be sold, services to be offered, and food and entertainment to be consumed (see our chapter “Underneath—The Superhighway Market” in the sister volume of this publication, Informal Market Worlds: Atlas (2015), xxx–xxx).

Stealth: At the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s... when we carried out the long-term research project “Wild City” on non-planned urban developments in Belgrade, the informal urban interventions that dotted the city (officially about 100,000 “wild” constructions, unofficially the number was closer to 200,000) looked to many like a massive chaotic attack on the urban landscape as we knew it. The sheer scale and messiness of the situation made it seem impossible to grasp this informal urbanism. Working together with Milica Topalovic and Ivan Kucina, we soon understood that we had to go beyond how things appeared. Instead, we had to look into how things work. At that moment, we also came across Kevin Kelly’s Out of Control, in which he explains the basic principles behind seemingly chaotic organizations and events in the natural world. We experimented with moving these principles from the natural to the urban world and, suddenly, we caught a glimpse of how to read this urban “chaos” in a much more profound way. This helped us to understand how a mass of dispersed, small actors could form unusual coalitions with larger institutional forces and have a powerful impact on the city. This has formed and informed our practice ever since.

atelier architecture autogé: The informal is constitutive for our practice. It guarantees, through sequences of non-spatial and programmatic indetermination, the adaptation of architecture to mid- and long-term changes and to new usages and contexts.
All our projects start informally. They do not have a plan in the beginning but rather propose a vision; we know where we want to go, but we do not know how exactly to do it and how long it will take. The implementation is negotiated informally with all those participating in the project. From this informal instance, little by little, elements are gradually formalized: a programme and a group are formed. Spatial devices are conceived and built. The project starts to take shape as it happens. At ecoxbox, for example, a series of pallet modules were built because people gradually claimed them: in the beginning, they needed a garden; after a few months, we realized that they needed a water collector; a kitchen was soon needed for processing the products of the garden; a mobile library and a media lab were desired by a different group of users who were not content with only gardening and wanted other cultural assets. Our collection of architectural devices has grown informally in time, in direct relation to these emerging needs and desires.

We can say that many of our projects started with informal occupations of space and emerging uses, and incrementally, these tactics led to the creation of architectural programmes and spatial devices. This was a lesson to learn: how not to plan and try to design and fix a project from the beginning, but rather try to encourage some kind of use that may eventually induce its own kind of architecture. Not only the uses were important in our projects but also the users. They were important and influential in the decisions about how something that had started informally should evolve. We have also supported them in tactical appropriations. While the informal beginnings of our projects forced us to take the risk of losing control, they also guaranteed a very active and continuous participation of users in processes of decision-making, which eventually contributed to the sustainability of the projects. It guaranteed the self-managed dimension of our architecture and prevented us from occupying the arrogant position of the grand master architect.

Of course, this does not mean that we completely gave up control and authority. On the contrary, it is clear that if we want to go, but we do not know how exactly to do it and how long it will take. The implementation is negotiated informally with all those participating in the project. From this informal instance, little by little, elements are gradually formalized: a programme and a group are formed. Spatial devices are conceived and built. The project starts to take shape as it happens. At ecoxbox, for example, a series of pallet modules were built because people gradually claimed them: in the beginning, they needed a garden; after a few months, we realized that they needed a water collector; a kitchen was soon needed for processing the products of the garden; a mobile library and a media lab were desired by a different group of users who were not content with only gardening and wanted other cultural assets. Our collection of architectural devices has grown informally in time, in direct relation to these emerging needs and desires.

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TC/FF: You mentioned earlier that you are interested in spatial configurations that are more permeable, different from the autonomy of architectural object, and that this sense of permeability has been emerging in your practice. What are some procedures or processes that characterize the temporalization of space and the flexibility, permeability, and porosity of the informal systems you referred to?

AE: I think that there are some concepts that are essential to the discussion of praxis as a theme in my previous answer. But I am going to mention a few of them to elaborate. These are related to the concept of the “dynamic adaptable”, which I think is absolutely necessary. As we say, you cannot show up with an already built toy. In other words, you cannot show up with a project that is already built, 100 per cent, because there is a need for a dynamic, two-way collaborative process. The construction of these projects, or answers, does not rest with a single author. And, surely, the author acts more as a curator in this case. Similarly, those who lead or can support these processes end up acting mostly as curators or co-authors of the resulting project. So, in a way, whatever gets built must have a great degree of constant innovation. In other words, it must be possible for it to be constantly innovative. It must be porous and adaptable in that sense. And I think there is one element that is fundamental to this, and it is quite simple. It has to do with learning to observe and listen. I think that, without a doubt, one of the keys to building processes lies in these two words, “observe” and “listen”. We could define this as a transparent way of speaking and looking. We need to come up with a workspace that is transparent.

In our experience, many of the most interesting and effective answers (because this area of work is not theoretical but rather, it is through actions and hard facts that one builds processes) are found in local processes and logistics as well as in informal processes. We need to strip ourselves down and be open-minded, but be smart about it, and use our intelligence and knowledge to solidify and come up with new logistics and ways of working. We need to build logistics that can adapt to existing dynamics and needs. In that way, we really need to work with what we have — the existing footprints and fabric — and with the people who are already there. There is another element that is also very important: being firmly willing to change normative, legislative, and technical paradigms after being re-evaluated in processes.

In our introduction, we emphasize that the informal is less an aesthetic category, and more a set of everyday practices. Can you comment on the informal as praxis?

AE: I think that there are some concepts that are essential to the discussion of praxis as a theme in my previous answer. But I am going to mention a few of them to elaborate. These are related to the concept of the “dynamic adaptable”, which I think is absolutely necessary. As we say, you cannot show up with an already built toy. In other words, you cannot show up with a project that is already built, 100 per cent, because there is a need for a dynamic, two-way collaborative process. The construction of these projects, or answers, does not rest with a single author. And, surely, the author acts more as a curator in this case. Similarly, those who lead or can support these processes end up acting mostly as curators or co-authors of the resulting project. So, in a way, whatever gets built must have a great degree of constant innovation. In other words, it must be possible for it to be constantly innovative. It must be porous and adaptable in that sense. And I think there is one element that is fundamental to this, and it is quite simple. It has to do with learning to observe and listen. I think that, without a doubt, one of the keys to building processes lies in these two words, “observe” and “listen”. We could define this as a transparent way of speaking and looking. We need to come up with a workspace that is transparent.

In our experience, many of the most interesting and effective answers (because this area of work is not theoretical but rather, it is through actions and hard facts that one builds processes) are found in local processes and logistics as well as in informal processes. We need to strip ourselves down and be open-minded, but be smart about it, and use our intelligence and knowledge to solidify and come up with new logistics and ways of working. We need to build logistics that can adapt to existing dynamics and needs. In that way, we really need to work with what we have — the existing footprints and fabric — and with the people who are already there. There is another element that is also very important: being firmly willing to change normative, legislative, and technical paradigms after being re-evaluated in processes.
The next question is central for us in this chapter. It comes down to advancing the discussion about informal urbanization by emphasizing the informal as a set of practices. Some of us have taken the role of interpreting the praxis embedded in the informal into new creative processes that can enable us to reimagine space, material, and economy. What procedures do you see embedded in the informal that have been useful in the transformation of your language as an architect and the way you conceptualize space, economy, and so on?

Jean-Philippe Vassal

JPV: Things start from a very small situation and grow, multiplying by ten or a hundred. I try to understand this growing movement. What I like about this, which I do not know if is good or not, is that I see no architectural form when I hear the word “informal”. I only see procedures. They are procedures that move, develop, and extend. We do not know when they will stop. They can stop after 60 steps or much later and develop into something much bigger. There is no form. We do not know what it will be. One year it is something, another one it could be different. In the winter it could be different than in the summer. It is this idea of constant change. It is alive. It is in movement.

I also refer to the work of Friedman since we are in constant conversation. We always tell students the first step is the most important. Just make that first step and perhaps the second one will be different. You do not know. It is a system of improvisation. It is then that you will see all these things develop, but first you must take that first step. In the end, there is no façade. It is just something growing. The façade will be something one day and another thing another day. This is how the informal works. It is a movement. It is just space that develops, grows, and offers capacities and potentialities. Life takes place in it and social relations are made possible. As architects or urban planners we can take part in this, actively opening up possibilities rather than passively staring at the process. Why it this possible? In many cases, the result comes from “sharing the minimum”, which is not an interesting solution. What is interesting is to “share the maximum” — to open up people’s imagination to other systems, platforms, and possibilities. I think this is the direction we need to take. We can help make the situation easier and friendlier, rather than trying to figure out all the problems at once. There is this fantastic building by Frei Otto in Berlin called Ökohäuser (Eco Houses) where he developed some very big platforms, seven metres from the ground, sitting on stilts. These platforms opened up possibilities for streets and roads and for people to insert their houses into this framework. It is about leaving room for possibility.

When I was in Nigeria, I wondered. “What can I do here as an architect? This is much better than what I can offer.” Perhaps the solution here was to just help open up possibilities, like building structures that are open to expansion through self-construction/owner intervention. We often forget some very simple facts in architecture. Take Corbusier’s Maison Domino, for instance, as the first step. As self-construction/owner intervention. We often forget some very simple facts in architecture. Take the first step. Then you will see all these things develop, but first you must take that first step. In the end, there is no façade. It is just something growing. The façade will be something one day and another thing another day. This is how the informal is interesting is to “share the maximum” — to open up possibilities, like building structures that are open to expansion through self-construction/owner intervention. We often forget some very simple facts in architecture. Take Corbusier’s Maison Domino, for instance, as the first step. Then you will see all these things develop, but first you must take that first step. In the end, there is no façade. It is just something growing. The façade will be something one day and another thing another day. This is how the informal is interesting is to “share the maximum” — to open up possibilities, like building structures that are open to expansion through self-construction/owner intervention. We often forget some very simple facts in architecture. Take Corbusier’s Maison Domino, for instance, as the first step. Then you will see all these things develop, but first you must take that first step. In the end, there is no façade. It is just something growing. The façade will be something one day and another thing another day. This is how the informal
tabula rasa — the top-down formal project that is driven by architects and developers at this moment — but rather, it is based on strategies of alteration of the existing city. So this question has to do more specifically with your work and your interest in enabling what you have called a “shared maximum”: how to achieve a double economy of construction where you choreograph how formal spatial systems can interact with lighter extended environments that are achievable within the economy of construction, but that produce spaces where these extensions can accommodate the kinds of quotidian practices that we have been talking about. There is a variety of very specific procedures in the way you approach space, such as the Domino frame you have mentioned. Many of these architectural paradigms that want to accommodate informality focus on the “frame” and the production of spatial qualities that enable alteration and transformation, and in so doing are not preoccupied with the preciousness of form. Your architecture is great evidence that architecture does not have to be such a protagonist in an iconic way. It might even be considered “non-architecture” in that sense. There is a modesty and capacity to produce a space that incites and invites the social and economic activities that we are talking about. Can you share some of these very specific procedures that you use in your work?

J. P. V.: For me, it goes back to Africa where I saw people using very simple materials that were gathered from anywhere. There were both simple and more sophisticated ones but, for them, it was not a problem to use/mix them together. After I came back to Europe, I saw that materials were about particular situations, responding to a particular economy, and other related matters. So the question became whether it was more useful to transform an existing building or to make a new one. We had to work with what we had. This was what was happening in Africa. People were in the middle of nowhere and had to find the minimum of materials needed to produce something. And it is also like that in other countries. There is always this question of economy and efficiency but also the question of comfort and pleasure. It is important to develop places where life can be pleasant, accommodating the evolution of life styles, and where people can exercise their creativity freely. And we can do that through very simple gestures. We can do that with the fresh air outside, we can do that with sun or shadow, we can do that with light, and with the minimum elements to establish a pattern, in which people can run, jump, or lie, and if this pattern is already there, then it is unnecessary to make a new one. You would keep what you have. We try always to work with these very simple things and the question of economy but always keeping in mind the quality of space, shadow, and light, or the possibility to be close to the sun.

We offer possibilities of choice.

When we built the first house, we knew the client very well. It was very nice to have meetings with him and know precisely what he wanted. But when we had to make social housing in other places, we did not know yet who the clients would be. And you cannot build for someone you do not know. So at times like this, what kind of architecture can you try to do? For us, it is about the kind of architecture in which people have all sorts of possibilities. We try to make large spaces because we think they offer more available possibilities than smaller ones. We try to increase which people have all sorts of possibilities. We try to make large spaces because we

Jeanne van Heeswijk: In neighbourhoods that are undergoing rapid changes and are under huge pressure from the forces of globalization, everyday informal practices are often the only manner in which an engagement in these processes can take place. This is why we have to learn from these informal practices and look at the various forms of interventionist tactics they invent in relation to the “invisible design” of legislation and formal policies applied to the built environment. So it is essential for my practice to become part of the whole process of change in a neighbourhood and to embed myself with my skill set in the dynamics of the everyday. How can practices of the everyday foster a critical reading of one’s own surroundings and an involvement in the changes that take place? This is a process of learning how to take responsibility for the creative potential of collective action offered by informal practices. It involves finding ways to reset the public value of urban space, to create an understanding of cities as a lived space, a shared space that everyone can change and contribute to.

Respondents

Marjetica Potrč: I like to say it is inspiring and productive to share knowledge with people who think differently. So I was surprised that by working and sharing knowledge with construction workers in Soweto, South Africa — where I spent two months with my students in 2014 — I was taken out of my comfort zone. I was forced into an exchange between two different practices, between linear thinking and thinking in outliers — which is how I explain the rerouting of the working process.

The two kinds of thinking are fundamentally different. The Sowetans were thinking in outliers. We, however, were linear thinkers. When we built the platform in Ubuntu Park, we wanted to be efficient and not waste time. This was a concern, since we needed to complete the platform in time for the Soweto Street Festival. Thembu Skosana, the construction worker we collaborated with, had the habit of “rerouting” the workday by trying out ideas we thought were unnecessary. For instance, we lost half a day when he planned the construction of walls on the platform, even though we all knew there would be no walls. I kept saying to him, “This doesn’t make sense.” Eventually, we realized that Thembu’s experimenting created a gap, a disruption, in the straight line of working, and this benefited the project.

Let me explain these two thinking processes: Linear thinkers proceed from point A to point B directly, in a straight line. They plan things in advance and try to be objective in order to be more efficient. The goal is to save time. Thinking in outliers follows a curvy line, a winding path. It is subjective and involves rerouting, which takes more time than the straight path. When linear thinkers plan ahead, their grasp of the future allows them to move steadily towards the final result. People who think in outliers are more interested in the present. They create subjective gaps that reroute the path of their thought. They may eventually reach the same goal as linear thinkers, only it takes more time. The results may be different as well.

Maybe the most important lesson we learned from working with the Sowetans was to think in outliers: rerouting takes more time and can bring a different result from what was planned. We learned that both ways of working — linear thinking and thinking in outliers — are equally important. Ours was not better. For their part, our Sowetan collaborators told us that they learned from us the importance of the future — the method of linear thinking, which is based on planning ahead.
5 THE INFORMAL AESTHETIC

Nevertheless, are there aesthetic potentialities that can be addressed?

> Alejandro Echeverri

TC/FF: This question has to do with aesthetics. Obviously, even though the previous question challenged the reduction of the informal to an aesthetic category, still, there is an undeniable aesthetic quality inherent in these dynamics. So, in relation to the ever-changing definitions of the aesthetic, can we reflect upon how the informal alters conventional categories?

AP: I am not sure if I would call it "the informal aesthetic", but the aesthetic expressions (or at least some of them) that come from informal contexts are the result of a particular confluence. I would say they are more honest in a way since they are the result of a combination of the emerging need to respond to immediate situations and urgencies but also to the theme of cultural expressions and affectation. At least in the case of Medellín and many other Colombian cities, informal realities respond to more than a single culture. Our country is vastly diverse due to the displacement and movement of people. People come from different places and cultures. And this has a lot to do with the combination of the city’s pluralistic answer to the emergent. People will build the stage for a neighbourhood party with whatever they can find. People are wily enough to use what is available to them but they also tie their affection and memories into it. So, the nicest thing is exactly the amplitude of this very diverse aesthetic space that originates from what is essential and sincere. It seems to me that there are codes, ways of building, and ways of representation that we can learn from more than we can teach them. I think that the main idea here is that we can learn from these expressions in order to build a new aesthetic if we want to pitch in. But we must have more of an open-minded attitude to come up with a new response to these processes. To me, more than a home, what we get is wonderful information that can be adapted or rewired in different ways. But I think the words that can best explain this are “the aesthetic of the essential”. These words carry with them the nudity that one can find in the informal but also the beauty that one can find in these forms.

TC/FF: Yes. That is wonderful as a concept. Which, just thinking about it, would be an interesting way to demystify functionalism, less with regard to an Existenzminimum (minimum subsistence level, Hans Meyer) but as maximum accommodation of social behaviour. What you are calling “aesthetic of the essential” resonates with the way Chilean poet, founder of Open City, Godofredo Iommi referred to architecture as “the skin of human activity”? How to understand certain everyday behaviours that are related to use and function in relation to norms and the use of space, and their place in the construction of a process-based aesthetics.

AP: I am not sure if I would call it “the informal aesthetic”, but the aesthetic expressions (or at least some of them) that come from informal contexts are the result of a particular confluence. I would say they are more honest in a way since they are the result of a combination of the emerging need to respond to immediate situations and urgencies but also to the theme of cultural expressions and affectation. At least in the case of Medellín and many other Colombian cities, informal realities respond to more than a single culture. Our country is vastly diverse due to the displacement and movement of people. People come from different places and cultures. And this has a lot to do with the combination of the city’s pluralistic answer to the emergent. People will build the stage for a neighbourhood party with whatever they can find. People are wily enough to use what is available to them but they also tie their affection and memories into it. So, the nicest thing is exactly the amplitude of this very diverse aesthetic space that originates from what is essential and sincere. It seems to me that there are codes, ways of building, and ways of representation that we can learn from more than we can teach them. I think that the main idea here is that we can learn from these expressions in order to build a new aesthetic if we want to pitch in. But we must have more of an open-minded attitude to come up with a new response to these processes. To me, more than a home, what we get is wonderful information that can be adapted or rewired in different ways. But I think the words that can best explain this are “the aesthetic of the essential”. These words carry with them the nudity that one can find in the informal but also the beauty that one can find in these forms.

TC/FF: This is the kind of thing that we are excited to generate from these dialogues: new concepts that help us to advance new paradigms of practice. The aesthetic as process is such an advance. In a way we can think of three interpretations of the aesthetic, when it comes to architecture. First, the aesthetic as an a priori set of moves that are imposed on reality and negate process. This is perhaps the more generic role of aesthetics for architects. Take Frank Gehry’s napkin sketches, which are then deployed into the world, as an example. Second, there is process as the generator of aesthetic language. Take Rem Koolhaas in his understanding of the grit of the metropolitan and the programmatic juxtapositions embedded in it as the DNA of the aesthetic. But you are really talking about a third category, which is exciting, where the aesthetic is process itself: the encounter of form and the contingency of the everyday.

JPV: We do not focus on the aesthetic because we know and are confident that it will appear in the end. It will be there. So the question is not to look or search for it but at the end of the process it will be there, because the processes develop the aesthetic and there is no reason for it to fail in the end. It is like that for everything. During the first years, we would sometimes get anxious because what we learned at architecture school said otherwise. But today, more and more, we are confident in the fact that if we just let the conditions grow, in the end we will have something that is clear, intelligent, and surprising — something that is unexpected and will be fantastic because of that. It is this kind of aesthetic that I am interested in. This aesthetic is never finished. It is no longer about producing masterpieces or buildings that will never be altered after completion. It is a living system. It is always alive. The inhabitants change and so does the system. It can grow, develop, and expand. It is this constant state of movement that interests me.

JPV: I am totally convinced of this. And the processes do not have to be perturbed at any moment in the search for beauty. No. Just leave it intact and see what happens in the end.

TC/FF: And actually, process is also embedded in what you observe. So, the beauty is not in looking at the finished product but looking at life as lived within the space and understanding the processes that enabled it. There is a beauty in observing the activity and life that the process has enabled.

JPV: It is totally open. It is not “content” or “form” at that moment. Nor is it an idea that closes the system and refuses to open it to some new things. No! I think it is good to keep this system open and to keep the possibility of having the system be perturbed by something else. It always becomes richer this way. However, it is risky. It is not as safe as an idea carried out from beginning to end. No. It is more adventurous but also more interesting.
6 TRANSFORMATIVE URBAN IMPACT

How can informal dynamics (i.e., informal economies, spatial organization and social networks) transform our thinking about infrastructure, housing, economy and citizenship?

> Alejandro Echeverri

TE/FP: This question deals with the impact of bottom up processes, such as informal densities, economies and social networks, in the contemporary city. In other words, informality and its spatial consequences; how these systemic informal conditions can influence our way of thinking about infrastructure, housing and the political economy of growth in the city, and even our notions of democracy and citizenship.

AE: There is a known element that has been around for a while that I think is essential to the informal. This element pertains to incrementalism. In reality, the building of a city, everything related to infrastructure, etc., is composed of “frozen” moments — more finite processes, which define the formal world. In the formal world, everything related to the building of infrastructure, urban transformation, etc., has codes and predefined timelines. The informal, on the other hand, deals with layers and the simultaneity of processes. The informal deals with the idea of reality as a progressive notion. You cannot point to a beginning or end. Informal space is really a living process to which different elements are constantly being added or subtracted. And I think this can redefine many themes and concepts if we start thinking in terms of the informal on the city and its institutions, and new forms of economic development? Previously, we had a conversation about architects as developers, for example. We talked about the possibility of architects being more proactive in producing the new economic pro-formas that can enable more inclusive and democratic forms of urban development. A major focus of this book has to do, in fact, with the impact of informal economy in the city, while much of the conversation in architecture circles continues to be about aesthetics for aesthetics sake. What your work has suggested is that, as architects, we can be the ones generating new economic frameworks to develop the city differently, and from which to reimagine infrastructure itself. Can you tell us more about how the informal can enable us to rethink the political economy of infrastructure? We are interested in thinking of infrastructure less as a totalizing, top-down intervention but rather as flexible system that supports the temporal dynamics embedded in the city. Can infrastructure be conceived differently?

The other question is: Can we rethink public housing? At a moment when the benevolent top-down public institution of the welfare state, committed to the construction of social housing in many countries of the world has come to an end (hopefully temporarily), what is the role of public institutions today? The relevant role of public spending to generate more intelligent public infrastructure and housing is in hiding. So, we need to rethink the public. Through your work, you might be suggesting that we can think of public housing through small scale interventions, as communities and architects become the developers of a new housing agenda that is inclusive, economic and democratic. Maybe we can argue that public housing today can be thought of as the aggregation of additive processes that need to evolve incrementally.

> Jean-Philippe Vassal

TE/FP: How can these informal dynamics all over the world enable us to rethink the very meanings of the “political” itself and of democracy as conceptual systems that engage complex plural social relations? Mainly, when in recent decades they have been framed by the private paradigm of neoliberal economic policies and political constructs? What is the transformative impact of the informal on the city and its institutions, and new forms of economic development? France has a very important organization that focuses on developing social housing but it is not very successful at it. They are not considering these questions. While there are many problems regarding the suburbs in big cities, I think the main question here deals with the people already living there. We cannot just build a project and say, “this is for you”. No. Urbanism is actually a cultural question. It is a question of how we want to live together (and it is also interesting to see how artists partake in these situations).
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There are many similarities between this way of thinking and the topics we have been discussing. These situations have to be democratically taken up by the population as a cultural question. We are not just helping people. It is a question of how we can build housing flats together. It is exciting and interesting to talk about creating democratic space and communicating this to people. It is a big challenge. It is also necessary to show them examples to make this network work. We need to show them what happens in workshops from Berlin to Tijuana. We need to look at these places simultaneously. It is knowledge for everyone.

TC/FF: That particular question of how to democratize knowledge has been central for us here at UCSD, the university where we both teach. We have begun a series of efforts to connect the university with communities. We are interested in this notion of “knowledge transfer” that you imply. We believe, in fact, that one approach to the informal must focus not in defining it but on translating its knowledges.

JPV: With the School of Architecture in Nantes, what we were trying to do is not a building just for architecture but a platform for discussion, debate, and information that could be open to artists and communities. This is why the building area is three times bigger. Inside, you have the school of architecture and the students and professors looking at what happens in these spaces of debate. And the total amount of work in there is three or four times greater because the inhabitants are invited to come in and read a book or look at the students’ diploma projects or professors’ research. It is this mixing of information that makes up this knowledge about space, and the city.

TC/FF: It seems that movements and networks of young architects understand their practice and their engagement with the city very differently. But the transformative effect on communities on the ground seems to be equally dramatic. People want to understand their spaces and how they work. They want to understand the role of the city and their own role, their own capacity, as citizens. There is an amazing eruption of agency in communities when they begin to reclaim their own spaces. Have you witnessed this transformation over time working with community engagement and activism, and its impact on democracy in the city?

JPV: The main questions remain. The question of democracy is so far away from the traditional institutions. We are ready to come up with something completely different. This is why the question of housing is so important. It is equally as important to be precise and work with these questions filtered by what we already have in front of us. We need to be extremely delicate and kind with the environment. There is no reason to take away what is already there. It is more complicated in other situations but it is also more interesting and exciting and even more possible to be efficient. We need to forget the notion of the “master plan” and instead focus on small interventions in the city.

Respondents

Alejandro Meitin: Informal dynamics are experiments in inter-subjectivity that enables, through radical and alternative approaches, instances of strategic resistance. In order to transform our thinking through these dynamics, we first have to understand these types of challenges, daring to expand the limits of what we consider possible without falling prey to romanticisms and paralyzing interferences. Disenheriting the forms that condition our understanding of reality, we need to realize that beyond the world designed by the experts we have another vital reality in front of us, one that is disobedient and transforming. How can we express something fundamentally new within a known structure?

What is important is to cultivate the right to find new meanings and subjectivities in order to discover other forms of life, to be transformed by desire and action. This is not simply about a change in scale or perspective; it is about the possibility to develop another objectivity. In this way, we can integrate emergent movements in the collective experience of life.

Alejandro Petti: Citizenship is the political relation between the citizen and the city. Public space is the physical and symbolic manifestation of this relation. It is the site where political rights are inscribed and where they find their formal and figurative representation. Today however, this political link exacerbates and neglects the condition of the refugee camp, where enemy populations are detained or simply “taken care of”. The “camp form” has complicated and transformed the very idea of the city as an organized and functional political community. The birth of the camp thus has the capacity to call into question the very idea of the city as a democratic space. And despite the fact that the “camp form” in its origin has been used as a tool for regulating the “excess of its political dimension”, the camp as an exceptional space could also be seen as a counter-site for emerging political practices and a new form of urbanism.

Palestinian refugee camps are not only sites of poverty and political subjugation. Paradoxically, their prolonged political, spatial and social exceptionality has provided a context for the emergence of a different form of life as well as a culture of exile. Categorically refusing to normalize their condition of exile, refugees have opened up ways...
7 SCALING UP

In what ways can the intelligence of the informal (at small scales) be scaled up?

> Alejandro Echeverri

TC/FP: Can we elaborate on this “aggregation” of local activities and small gestures, you mentioned before? How can these small gestures scale up? These are often the questions that emerge from thinkers who dwell on the macro scale of the city and are sceptical of the role of the micro, the local. We are asking: How do we problematize the interface between large and small, the planned and the unplanned, formal and informal? Is the informal merely a physical phenomenon, or does the possibility of scaling up have also to do with enabling us to rethink the institutional logics and protocols of governance, for example, or of civic participation processes, or economic flows?

AE: I think it is a mistake to reduce the true value of small scales. I think that, at least from our experience here in Medellín, many of the city’s greatest transformations really come from the systematization or construction of models or processes at local scales within local realities. At least, this is the case with the politically fragile environments of many Latin American cities, where government stability is not guaranteed and where the lack of follow-up to big projects is perhaps their greatest weakness. In this atmosphere, there is a need for replicability and the generalization of certain positive attributes that are built locally to enable elevating these transformations. I am a firm believer that the answer coming from these emerging contexts lies much more in the multiplication of small actions in local processes — emergent or not, formal or not.

And I am certainly convinced that, in any type of urban action or process, sustainability results from the inclusion of local dynamics and participants. It is that level of support and its relational density that can generate projects, make them grow, allow them to be used, make them generate feedback, and guarantee permanence: that is what makes up the local.

I think that this is the question we need to ask ourselves: How to generate a series of processes that can be replicated and have an impact at a general scale on different fields. This is where the political can have a role — or top-down support in that sense. Unfortunately, there is a big void when it comes to understanding this. But I think that if we think past the physical, if we think about the value of processes, then there is a great lesson to be learned from local processes. We can justify recycling some of these concepts and using them in formal conditions. There are many formal processes that the city needs. We need to start incorporating spaces that allow for a dialogical way of building and that are more collaborative and dynamic. Today, the representation of the political has changed and the space of political power is now represented in some very strong ways by the micro. The local makes its presence felt more and more every day.

TC/FP: This is where the question of evolving practices becomes even more relevant, as many of these new spaces of operation in the construction of the city need to be facilitated. Some of us become interlocutors between these scales, to produce new inter-dependencies, and collaborations. There is here a space of operation for many kinds of practitioners to become mediators in the translation and transfer of knowledges, and to curate interfaces through which people and institutions at varying scales come to understand how these small actions can conceptually and operationally elevate themselves to transform the conventions of urbanization today, particularly the tendency to see the local as an obstacle.

> Jean-Philippe Vassal

TC/FP: Let us turn to the last couple of questions, which relate to the impact that informal dynamics have had on the evolution of cities and how these small-scale dynamics are inevitably scaling up.

JPV: It starts small. It is just one bedroom and then another bedroom, and another living room, and a kitchen, and a flat, and another flat, and another flat, and it becomes bigger and bigger. It starts in this precision/position, in this proximity to a human being, housing, and inhabiting. This precision/position is absolutely necessary in all situations — past and existing, countryside or in the cities, everywhere. We need this extreme precision at the beginning. And after that it is just the multiplication of these little things. In the end, the multiplication of these very small things can become much bigger than a single big thing that you try to control from the beginning. And it is always expanding. It is growing. To me, the city that grows and the possibility to develop what already exists can be much more ambitious than a huge project.

TC/FP: To carry on from an earlier theme, about how bottom-up processes need direction or guidance from the expertise of the architect or the resources from a municipality, can we discuss how that convergence of top-down and bottom-up actually works, how scaling up happens, how the small scale begins to infect or infuse? What is the role of the architect in this? What is the role of the planner in enabling these dynamics to find their scale?

JPV: It is also about information and being curious to all of these experiences, such as what is happening in South America. But it interesting to look at Berlin for example, where groups of architects are also working like developers but in much more interesting ways, making their own projects, buying parcels, working with banks, etc. In the end, the result is an extremely cheap, but quality housing system that is ten times better than what the traditional developers are doing. And these “experiments” are happening everywhere — in Johannesburg, in Berlin, in Europe. You have new
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movements where people and architects clearly want to create change, which is very powerful. And the resulting network is very efficient, and this is exciting because urban planning is absolutely obsolete today. We need to challenge it and change it. We need to think differently. Sadly, the quality of housing today is extremely low, at least in Europe, while in the 1950s really interesting social housing projects were being developed. Now, we just think about insulation, which results in flats that are starting to look more and more like jails due to a lower number of windows. Everything is defined not by the cost of construction but by the price in the market. The market says that you need to have small bedrooms because the more there are, the higher the price will be. The cost of construction is not the problem. The problem is adapting to standards defined by the market, which is worsening living standards. But we are willing to be ambitious and work differently. We are willing to propose better forms for life, movement, comfort, resulting in more affordable situations.

TC/FF: Our final question is about this relationship between space and programme. When you talk about the Nantes School of Architecture, in the way you designed it to be such a democratic space that is transparent and enables that kind of fluidity but that is, at the same time, a space of debate. To what degree, as architects, should we be designing protocols and the kinds of curatorial programmes that can, without dominating, anticipate and guide social encounter in more intentional ways?

JPV: The school of architecture à Nantes is just a bigger Maison Latapie, a house we designed earlier. The question of housing, or living, is everywhere: living in museums, living in the city, living in libraries, living in restaurants, living on the border of the river. During the past 30 years, architects have been placed in situations where they lack freedom. Urban planning, programmes, economy, politicians, all define parcels and blocks, and on these blocks architects are asked to partake in competitions for buildings, forms, objects, iconic situations. There is no relation between this collection of economic objects and predefined plots and buildings. When we designed the school of architecture at Nantes, we wanted to create relations with the exterior — between the inhabitants and the street and the rest of the city. In other words, we wanted to represent urban planning as a building. We drew inspiration from Cedric Price’s Fun Palace, for example, and its intersection of programmes but also of seasons, times, and movements. Its vertical and horizontal systems allowed crossing people to debate, discuss, and observe. It transformed visitors into spectators. It was open 24/7. There was also an exhibition at the Palais de Tokyo that took these huge installations with more than 20,000 tiles to visualize nonstop debates, discussions, and meetings with people. It became a space where we could rethink the development of space and cities.
Peter Mörtenböck is Professor of Visual Culture at the Vienna University of Technology and visiting researcher at Goldsmiths College, University of London, where he has initiated the Networked Cultures project (www.networked-cultures.org), a platform for global research on collaborative art and architecture practices. His current work explores the interaction of such practices with resource politics, global economies and urban transformation.

Helge Mooshammer is director of the international research projects Relational Architecture and Other Markets (www.othermarkets.org) at the School of Architecture and Urban Planning, Vienna University of Technology. He is currently a Research Fellow in the Department of Visual Cultures at Goldsmiths College, University of London. His research is concerned with changing forms of urban sociality arising from processes of transnationalization, capital movements, informal economies, and newly emerging regimes of governance.

Mörtenböck and Mooshammer have published numerous essays on contemporary art, bottom-up urbanism and collaborative forms of spatial production, including in Grey Room, Architectural Research Quarterly and Third Text. Venues where their research and curatorial work has been presented include the Whitechapel Gallery London, the Netherlands Architecture Institute Rotterdam, Storefront for Art and Architecture New York, Proekt Fabrika Moscow, Santral Istanbul, Ellen Gallery Montreal, and the Venice Architecture Biennale. Their recent books include Visual Cultures at Opportunity (2015), Occupy: Räume des Protests (2012), Space (Re) Solutions: Intervention and Research in Visual Culture (2011), and Networked Cultures: Parallel Architectures and the Politics of Space (2008), www.thinkarchitecture.net

Teddy Cruz is Professor of Public Culture and Urbanization in the Department of Visual Arts at the University of California, San Diego, where he is founding Co-Director of the Center for Urban Ecologies and the Blum Cross-Border Initiative. He is known internationally for his urban research on the Tijuana/San Diego border, advancing border neighborhood as sites of cultural production from which to rethink urban policy, affordable housing, and civic infrastructure. Recipient of the Rome Prize in Architecture in 1991, his honours include representing the United States in the 2008 Venice Architecture Biennale, the Ford Foundation Visionaries Award in 2011, and the 2013 Architecture Award from the U.S. Academy of Arts and Letters. From 2012–2013 Cruz was special advisor on Civic and Urban Initiatives for the City of San Diego, and with Fonna Forman led the development of its Civic Innovation Lab.

Fonna Forman is Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of California, San Diego and founding Co-Director of the ucsd Center on Global Justice and the Blum Cross-Border Initiative. She is a political theorist best known for her revisionist work on Adam Smith, reevaluating the ethical, social, spatial, and public dimensions of his political economy. Current work focuses on theories and practices of global justice as they manifest at local and regional scales, and the place of civic engagement and public space interventions in strategies of equitable urban transformation. Forman is presently co-investigating (with Teddy Cruz) a Ford Foundation-funded study of citizenship culture in the San Diego/Tijuana border region, in collaboration with Antanas Mokcus and the Bogota-based xcoo, Corpovisionarios.

Authors

atelier d'architecture autogérée (aaa) is a collective platform founded in 2001 by Constantin Petcou and Doina Petrescu which includes architects, artists, urban planners, landscape designers, sociologists, students, and residents. aaa’s practice enables the collective appropriation of temporarily available spaces by city dwellers and their transformation into a series of self-managed urban commons. This micro-political project has been carried out through different instances and locations: scoobox and Passage 56 in Paris, and more recently R-Urban, which started in the suburban town of Colombes, France. aaa has received a number of international prizes, including the Zumtobel Foundation prize for research and initiative 2014, Curry Stone Design Prize 2011, and place at the Prix Grand Public des Architectures Contemporaines de la Métropole Parisienne 2010 and the special mention of the European Public Space Prize 2010. www.urbantactics.org

Martha (Marty) Chen is a Lecturer in Public Policy at the Harvard Kennedy School, an Affiliated Professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Design, and the International Coordinator of the global research-policy-action network Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO). An experienced development practitioner and scholar, her areas of specialization are employment, gender, and poverty with a focus on the working poor in the informal economy. Before joining Harvard in 1987, she had two decades of resident experience in Bangladesh, working with WIEGO, and in India, where she served as field representative of Oxfam America. Dr. Chen received a Ph.D. in South Asia Regional Studies from the University of Pennsylvania. She was awarded a high civilian award, the Padma Shri, by the Government of India in April 2011; and a Friends of Bangladesh Liberation War award by the Government of Bangladesh in December 2012.

Mauricio Corbalan founded myred, an independent research platform based in Buenos Aires, with architect Pio
Torroja in 2005, myth's focus lies on formulating complex scenarios and the “performativity” of regional networks by building up strategic associations with activists, “grass-roots communities,” and experts from several domains. Since 2008, Corbalan and Torroja have been actively involved in the clean up of the Matanus Riachuelo, the most polluted watershed in South America. In 2017, they launched “Que pasa, riachuelo?”, an online platform to encourage stakeholders to monitor the restoration plan.

Vincent Dourkar is an urbanist working at the intersection of spatial planning, environmental anthropology and critical cartography. Co-founder of the Spatial Ethnography Lab (SERL), he is a faculty member at the Indian Institute of Design (IxD) in Ahmedabad, India, where his activities supported community-based advocacy efforts. Prior to joining IxD, he worked with slum rehabilitation initiatives at the Centre for Development Studies & Activites in Pune, India, and with architecture studios in the United States. Dourkar is currently a researcher with the Urban South Asia Project and Urban Theory Lab at Harvard University's Graduate School of Design.

Alejandro Echeverri is cofounder and Director of urbam, the Center for Urban and Environmental Studies at EAFIT University in Medellín, Colombia. His work has earned, among other awards, the National Architectural Award in 2004, the National Urban Planning Award in 2006, and the prize for Community Design Prize in 2009, and the 10th Veronica Rudge Green Prize in Urban Design from Harvard. As the General Manager of the Empresa de Desarrollo Urbano (EDU) from 2004 to 2005, and as the City’s Director of Urban Projects for the Municipality of Medellín from 2005 to 2008, Echeverri has played a crucial role in the rejuvenation of Medellín. With the Mayor, Sergio Fajardo, Echeverri established public works programs and initiated building a series of visually striking libraries, schools, parks, and community centers in Medellín’s most impoverished areas. Because of these efforts, Medellín is now considered a blueprint for the future of other cities in the developing world.

Raka Febrayani is a researcher who focuses on urban development and change. She studied urban planning and has worked for several private consultancies and government agencies. For the past five years, she has observed resident interactions in daily life across various facets of the built environment, such as sidewalks, public lavatories, and bus stops. She has also designed a wide range of artistic interventions as a means of generating knowledge about spatial transformations underway in Jakarta, specializing in public art and interactive and documentary video.

Emiliando Gandolfi is an urbanist and independent curator. He is co-founder of Cohabitation Strategies, a non-profit cooperative for socio-spatial development based in New York City and Rotterdam. The cooperative’s mission is to facilitate transformative urban interventions that bring together theoretical and community approaches to urban development around the desire for social, spatial, and environmental justice. Gandolfi is also the Director of the Curruy Stone Design Prize, one of the most prominent social impact design awards, established to support design as a critical force to create positive social transformations and empower local communities.

Hou Hanru is a prolific writer and curator based in Rome, Paris, and San Francisco. He is currently the Artistic Director of MAxxI (National Museum for 21st Century Art in Rome, Italy). He received degrees from the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing in the 1980s. He was Director of Exhibitions and Public Program as well as Chair of Exhibition and Museum Studies at San Francisco Art Institute from 2006 to 2012. In the past two decades, Hou Hanru has curated and co-curated around 100 exhibitions across the world. He is a consultant for numerous cultural institutions internationally and frequently contributes to various journals on contemporary art and culture. He has also served as jury member for prestigious art prizes, including the recent “Hugo Boss Prize Asia” and Venice Biennale of Architecture (2014).

Keith Hart lives with his family in Paris. He is Centennial Professor of Economic Anthropology at the London School of Economics and International Director of the Human Economy research programme at the University of Pretoria, South Africa. He has taught in a dozen universities on both sides of the Atlantic, for the longest time at Cambridge, and was the Director of the African Studies Centre. He contributed the idea of an informal economy to developmental studies and has written extensively on money. He has also worked as a journalist, publisher, consultant and gambler. His recent books include (co-edited) The Human Economy: A Citizen’s Guide (2020), People, Money and Power in the Economic Crisis: Perspectives from the Global South (2014) and with (Chris Hani) Economic Anthropology: History, Ethnography, Critique (2012). His website is http://themoneybank.co.uk

Jun Jiang is a research architect, archive editor and freelance writer. He was the founding editor in chief of Urban China Magazine (2005-2010) and has worked as a project director at the Strelka School of Architecture, Design and Economics since 2011. He is a founding member of the Centre on Migration Policy and Society of Oxford University (2011–2012) and an associate professor at Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts. He has undertaken urban research and experimental studies to explore the interrelationship between design phenomena and urban dynamics, covering more than 200 Chinese cities and around 50 countries worldwide. He has been the editor-in-chief of books such as Urban China: Work in Progress (co edited with Brendan McGettrick, 2009) and A Village by the Sea (2010) for the Shenzhen Pavilion at the 2010 Shanghai Expo. He was also curator of the China Pavilion at the Venice Architecture Biennale 2014.

Lawrence Liang is a co-founder of the Alternative Law Forum, where he is a lawyer and researcher. He has been working on the intersection of law, culture and technology and has also worked on issues relating to media piracy and the democratization of technology and culture. He is currently finishing a book on law, justice and cinema in India.

MAP Office is a multidisciplinary platform devised by Laurent Gutierrez and Valérie Portefaix, whose projects have been exhibited at major international art, design and architecture events, including their most recent project Hong Kong is Land, which was presented at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Since 1996, the artist/architect duo has been based in Hong Kong, working on physical and imaginary territories using different means of expression, which include drawing, photography, video, installations, performance, and literary and theoretical texts. Gutierrez and Portefaix both teach at the School of Design at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University.

Rahul Mehrotra is a practising architect and educator. He works in Mumbai and teaches at Harvard University's Graduate School of Design, where he is Professor of Urban Design and Planning, and Chair of the Department of Urban Planning and Design as well as a member of the steering committee of Harvard's South Asia Initiative. His practice, rma Architects, was founded in 1990 and has executed a range of projects across India. Mehrotra has written, co-authored and edited a vast repertoire of books on Mumbai, its urban history, its historic buildings, public spaces and planning processes. He is a member of the steering committee of the Aga Khan Awards for Architecture.

Alejandro Meitin is an artist, lawyer, social innovator, and co-founder of the art collective Ala Plástica (1997), which is based in La Plata, Argentina. He has been a member of an independent network of artists, critics, curators, and scholars interested in new ways of thinking about contemporary artistic practice and critical theory. Meitin has been involved in researching and developing collaborative and experimental practices and has a number of exhibitions, residencies, and publications to his credit. He has also taught courses and given lectures in Latin America, North America, and Europe.

William Rees Morrish is an urban activist, architect, and Professor of Urban Ecologies at Parsons The New School of Design in New York City. His extensive urban research and professional design and policy work in numerous cities recognizes that infrastructure means much more than the highways, bridges, water systems, and power lines. It includes the social and spatial fabric that supports the communities that live in and around these places. This fabric shapes the psychological, social and physical relations that promote or undermine the social and political systems that bind human societies together. It is a short hand for the structural underpinnings of civil society’s public realm upon which a city’s human and ecological resiliance is defined. He received a Bachelor of Architecture from University of California, Berkeley (1971), and a Master of Architecture in Urban Design from the Harvard Graduate School of Design (1978).

Robert Neuwirth has spent most of the past four years hanging out with street hawkers, smugglers, and sub rosa import/export firms to write Stalines of Nature, a book that chronicles the global growth of System D—the parallel economic arena that today accounts for half the jobs on the planet. Prior to that, he lived in squatter communities across four continents to write Shadow Cities, a book that attempts to humanize these vibrant, energetic, and horribly misunderstood communities. His articles on cities, politics, and economic issues have appeared in many publications, including Harper’s, Scientific American, Forbes, Fortune, The Nation, The New York Times, The Washington Post, and Cip Lim. Before becoming a reporter, Neuwirth worked as a community organizer and studied philosophy. He lives in New York City and does most of his writing on manual typewriters.

Alessandro Petti is an architect and researcher in urbanism and art in an (De)colonizing Architecture (Art Residency), an architectural office and an artistic residency programme that combines conceptual speculations and architectural interventions. AIAW was awarded the Price Claus Prize for Architecture, the Foundation for Arts Initiative Grant, shortlisted for the Iakov Chernikhov Prize, and was shown in various biennales and museums around the world (www.decolonizing.org). Alongside research and practice, Petti is pursuing a critical pedagogy. He is founding member of Campus in Camps, an experimental educational programme by Al Quds University hosted by the Phoenix Center in Dheisheh refugee camp Bethlehem (www.campusincamps.ps). More recently, he co-authored the book Architecture after Revolutions (2014), an invitation to rethink today’s struggles for justice and equality not only from the historical perspective of resistance, but also from that of a continued struggle for decolonization.

Marjetica Potrč is an artist and architect who has been a professor at the University of Fine Arts/KhFk in Hamburg,
Lloyd Rudolph is Emeritus Professor of the University of Chicago, Department of Political Science, renowned for his scholarship on Indian society and politics, and the writings of Mohandas Gandhi. He received his Ph.D. in 1956 from Harvard University. He has co-authored eight books with Susanne Hoeber Rudolph, including “The Making of Development in India (1967), in Pursuit of Lakshmi: The Political Economy of the Indian State (1987), and Postmodern Gandhi and Other Essays: Gandhi in the World and at Home (2006). In 2014, the Government of India honoured Lloyd Rudolph and Susanne Hoeber Rudolph for their services to literature and education by bestowing on them the third highest civilian award, the Padma Bhushan.


In the mid-1990s, he began a multi-study project on the contemporary global city. Her publications include Speculation, New: Essays and Artworks (2014), edited with Carin Kuoni and Prem Krishnamurthy, and the forthcoming monograph Speculative City: Infrastructure and Complexity in Global Maimai.

Saskia Sassen is the Robert S. Lynd Professor of Sociology and Chair, the Committee on Global Thought, Columbia University (www.saskiasassen.com). Her new book is Expulsion: Bratality and Complexity in the Global Economy (2014). Recent books are Territory, Authority, Rights: From Medieval to Global Assemblages (2007), and the 4th fully updated edition of Cities in a World Economy (2012). Among her other books is The Global City (1991/2001). Her books have been translated into over 20 languages. Sassen is the recipient of diverse awards and mentions, ranging from multiple doctor honoris causa to named lectures and being selected for various honours lists. Most recently, she was awarded the Principe de Asturias 2015 Prize in the Social Sciences.

Jeanne van Heeswijk is a visual artist who facilitates the creation of dynamic and diversified public spaces in order to “radicalize the local”. Van Heeswijk embeds herself as an active citizen in communities, often working for years at a time. These long scale projects, which have occurred in many different countries, transcend the traditional boundaries of art in duration, art and place. Van Heeswijk trains teachers and guides ecological agriculture in western Birbulm, West Bengal, India. Current projects: consorcial initiatives, continental Africa; Himalayan Studies, Kathmandu-Kolkata-Kunning; thinking globally together, French India and Senegambia; re-translating Grammatology, doing a book on W.E.B Du Bois. Member, Council on Values, World Economic Forum. Daughter of a feminist mother and gender sensitive father, entrenched in feminism across the spectrum and beyond single issue.

Jean Philippe Vassal was born in Casablanca in 1954. He graduated from the school of architecture of Bordeaux in 1975. Later books include Poverty Capital: Microfinance and the State in South East Asia (1990), and The Making of Development (2012) and the forthcoming co-edited volume, Territories of Poverty (2015). Roy is also committed to developing new genres of public scholarship. One recent endeavour is The @GlobalGov Project: http://blumcenter.berkeley.edu/globalgov/
Matias Viegener is a writer, artist, and critic who lives in Los Angeles and teaches at CalArts. His critical focus ranges from drones and surveillance, to public space, food, participatory art, gender, and text. His work has been exhibited at LACMA, Yerba Buena Center, Ars Electronica, ARCO Madrid, the Whitney, Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions, Machine Project, moCA Los Angeles, moCA San Diego, and internationally in Mexico, Colombia, Germany, and Austria. He is the author of 2500 Random Things About Me Too, and editor of forthcoming I’m Very Into You, the correspondence of Kathy Acker and McKenzie Wark. His work has been written about in The New Yorker, Salon.com, The New York Times, Art in America, Frieze, Art:21, The Los Angeles Times, Hyperallergic, and The Huffington Post, and he is a 2013 Creative Capital award recipient.