

## Thinking the Informal City, Dossier introduction

Paulo Moreira

moreirapaulo@gmail.com

Architect and researcher, FAUL-CIAUD-Gestual. Post-doctoral fellow in the Africa Habitat project, at Faculdade de Arquitectura da Universidade de Lisboa, financed by FCT and AKDN (*Knowledge for Development Initiative* programme), Portugal

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### Thinking the Informal City

Cities have always harboured 'rich' and 'poor' populations, and have always contained different areas with different characters. In this respect, there are many cities where the urban poor have been progressively pushed to the outskirts for the sake of a homogenised global culture. At a time when thinking the city is moving towards seeking to accept and understand poor, segregated neighbourhoods, rather than to ignore or eradicate them, the need for new discourses and experiments on the ground is becoming increasingly urgent. It is essential for architects and researchers to tackle the topic, so that this global phenomenon begins to be characterised as a viable type of urban realm. This dossier offers a practical and theoretical reflection on the subject in the architectural field.

Recent urban studies, especially those focusing on the subject of informal cities, have suffered from over-generalisations. Here, however, I call for the importance of paying particular attention to concrete local conditions. Geographic differentiations should be addressed not only between different continents (Africa, Asia, Europe, and so on) or regions (sub-Saharan Africa, South America, for instance), but also on a more local scale (concrete neighbourhoods, or parts of neighbourhoods). In this way, we would approach the city from the particular to the general – the specificity of a building or a neighbourhood would be constantly placed within its broader urban context. Hence, design projects or investigations on informal neighbourhoods would become more than simply explorations of informal architectural order. Rather, they would become contributions to understanding cities in all their depth.

It seems that if one does not understand the nature of the contribution, or potential contribution, of informal cities across the World, then one is overlooking the concept of 'hybrid' urbanity, and maintaining a segregationist conceptualisation of the 'formal' city versus its 'slums'. Jennifer Robinson labels this type of cities simply as "ordinary":

"We need a form of theorising that can be as cosmopolitan as the cities we try to describe. This would be a form of urban theory that can follow the creative paths of urban dwellers – across the city or around the world – as they remake cities and that can draw on the transformative potential of shared lives in diverse, contested – ordinary – cities to imagine new urban futures." (ROBINSON, 2006: 3)

The basis for understanding informal and segregated neighbourhoods is to read cities as territories of diversity. This dossier is a claim for practitioners to pay particular attention to the very heterogeneity of society itself, rendering the terms and methods familiar to the social sciences relevant to any architectural action (JACOBS, 1961; INGOLD, 2013). This kind of understanding aims to lend nuance to the discourse of certain architects and urban practitioners, who tend to enclose their practices within the disciplinary boundaries, as well as tend to divide the urban population into oversimplified groups and dismiss the virtues of the city's social and cultural diversity.

As a start, analysis of these complex urban environments should try to move away from the terms which have acquired pejorative connotations, such as 'slum'. In recent practice and literature in the field of architecture, this term has evolved and 'informal city' is now commonly used, although the pejorative connotations have not entirely disappeared. Barry Bergdoll, former chief curator of architecture and design at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York – where he was responsible for the exhibition and publication "Small Scale, Big Change: New Architectures of Social Engagement" (2010-11) –, recognises that "the last forty years too have seen a dramatic increase in what has come to be called the 'informal city', a term intended to replace the negative connotation of slums" (BERGDOLL, 2010: 12). I advocate for the use of local words such as *barrio* or *musseque* when discussing this kind of urban contexts – this may be a step towards avoiding (often negative) generalisations such as "slum" or "global city".

Another way to tackle the subject of the informal city is to look beyond its concrete built form and perceive its sociological formation and the transitory nature of its population. One of the studies that best frames this state of urbanity is Doug Saunders' *Arrival City* (2011). The author acknowledges the difficulty of defining a variety of places in single, totalitarian terms:

"I am coining the term 'arrival city' to unite these places, because our conventional scholarly and bureaucratic language (...) misrepresents them by disguising their dynamic nature, their transitory role." (SAUNDERS, 2011: 19)

In my view, we have to develop plural understandings of a type of architecture and urban culture that remains underrepresented. We must aim for a kind of counter-praxis that breaches the boundaries of the dominant narrative defending questionable economic, political and moral models. The type of practitioner I'm in favour of, who acts beyond architecture's limiting concepts, is described by Justin McGuirk as the "activist architect". In *Radical Cities*, the author dissects the methodologies employed by these practitioners:

“The activists are cautious. They observe the conditions, they accumulate data, and then they experiment. The modernists began with bulldozers; activists begin with a prototype. (...) This may turn out to be one of the fundamental shifts in the character of the architect in the twenty-first century. They have to create networks. Just as they need political allies, they must ingratiate themselves with local communities. (...) To work in the community’s interest you need the citizens on your side, because the days of telling people what’s good for them are over.” (McGuirk, 2014: 32-33):

Acknowledging the informal as a vital part of the city’s ecosystem has been the great U-turn of urban policy and architectural practice over the last two decades. I believe that, in many potential ways, this positive approach can inform design projects and architectural studies. At times when dynamics of expulsion and segregation proliferate, a deeper engagement with and understanding of the places of the expelled is greatly needed. Places which are somewhat invisible to the standard measures of our states and economies, can’t be seen simply as ‘dark holes’. Such places are crying out for recognition and should be made conceptually and materially visible. We as architects should cast light on these incredibly diverse and vital, yet endangered, neighbourhoods. In doing so, we may potentially uncove new modes of thinking the informal city.

This EP - Estudo Prévio Dossier shows that this approach can lighten up the field of architecture in many ways. Ways of looking and acting in the so-called “informal” city are revealed. The Dossier begins with a rare and generous interview with the architect-urbanist, researcher and teacher Isabel Raposo, conducted by the architect Gonalo Folgado and myself. The *Outros Bairros* initiative was invited to debate on the inspiring work it has been developing in Cape Verde, which will certainly become a reference for urban practices and policies in Portuguese-speaking African cities, and beyond. With the Angolan architect and researcher Osvaldo Braz and Isabel Raposo, we dive into the urbanism of contrasts in the city of Luanda. Finally, directly from Brazil, the architect-urbanist Lara Isa Costa Ferreira offers an essential reading suggestion for those like us who are interested in urban studies. With these testimonies, we hope to contribute to the construction of new vocabularies and ways of thinking about the informal city.

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**Paulo Moreira** is an architect based in Porto and a researcher at FAUL-CIAUD-Gestual. He is the co-coordinator of the Chicala Observatory, a research cluster based at the Department of Architecture, Agostinho Neto University, Angola, and a post-doctoral fellow in Africa Habitat, a research project based at the Faculty of Architecture, University of Lisbon, funded by FCT and Aga Khan Development Network (*Knowledge for Development Initiative* programme).

[www.paulomoreira.net](http://www.paulomoreira.net)