DAVID GOUVERNEUR

Planning and Design for Future Informal Settlements: Shaping the Self-Constructed City

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Informal settlements are part of the urban world reality. An unprecedented urban growth in developing countries is driven not only by poverty and social exclusion but also by wars, climate change effects and natural disasters, leading to the massive movement of people to places of opportunity and safety. About 1 billion people according to the United Nations live in self-constructed settlements lacking access to basic infrastructure and services, and there might be 2 billion by 2050. This is unquestionably one of the most important challenges of the XXI century for politicians, academics and professionals, and the manner in which this task is managed will have major repercussions on the political, socio-economic, and environmental stability of the planet. For this reason we are in urgent need of new perspectives and tools to deal with the processes of informal urbanization, and this book is a significant contribution in such direction.

The ideas contained in this book derive from 25 years in academia and professional practice of the author, working in the public sector, and teaching interdisciplinary Studios dealing with emerging informal settlements, both in Latin America and at the School of Design at the University of Pennsylvania. The book posits from the perspective of landscape urbanism a hybrid method of criteria and techniques to deal with contemporary urban and environmental challenges and the dynamics of the informal city.

There are many definitions of informal settlements but that suggested by the UN Habitat Programme is probably the most widely used. This defines informal settlements as: i) residential areas where a group of housing units has been constructed on land to which the occupants have no legal claim, or which they occupy illegally; ii) unplanned settlements and areas where housing is not in compliance with current planning and building regulations (unauthorized housing). In this context it is important to remark that for the author informality is not only a worldwide marginal phenomenon out of the legal framework but an integral part of hybrid cities in which the formal and the informal can co-exist and interact in a beneficial manner. That means that informality is a reality to be proactively embraced -instead of removing it- by addressing the urban realm, recognizing that social ties are very strong within self-constructed neighborhoods, and the sense of place and identity are usually more vibrant than in any planned social housing program.

The author suggests that it is possible to provide a design framework to assist the processes of informal urbanization tacking advantage of their cultural practices and providing them with living conditions that they could not achieve on their own. In order to do that Gouverneur suggest a working method which he calls the Informal Armatures Approach (IA). Such approach is a combination of physical and performative elements that operate at neighbourhood and at urban/metropolitan scales. The author describes how IA can begin making a difference before informal areas occupy the territories, and accompanying their gradual transformation. Such changes are expected to occur not only in the public realm -fostering the provision of public space, infrastructure, mobility, water management, communal services, food production and forms of governance- but also providing adequate conditions for the self-construction of dwellings, and urban uses that are normally only found in the formal city.

The author also suggests how to engage communities in the transformative processes, and how to gradually incorporate a diversity of uses that are meant to supplement the self-constructed areas, as the communities consolidate, evolve, have greater expectations, and become part of much larger urban agglomerations. This anticipatory and adaptable design approach contrasts sharply with the conventional methods of city planning based on static land use plans with no design or process considerations. An important aspect addressed by the IA approach is how to secure the spatial requirements to address the changing urban demands.

IA approach design components are organized into three categories: Corridors, Patches, and Stewards which have the flexibility to be adapted to local natural and cultural particularities. Corridors are linear elements that articulate the systems of mobility, infrastructure, public space and water management. Two different types of Corridors are defined: Protectors and Attractors. Protectors avoid the unwanted occupation of environmental or cultural assets, meanwhile attractors encourage the occupation of areas more suitable for urbanization. Both of them are expected to serve as the skeleton of support systems, managing a high percentage of the transformations of the settlements in the future, and can provide public spaces and services. The design and management of the Corridors require public involvement, particularly in the early stages of occupation and development.

Patches are areas that interact with the Corridors. They are also grouped into two categories: Receptors and Transformers. Receptors provide suitable lots for self-construction, and in some circumstances for a combination of self-constructed solutions, accompanied by expandable hosing shelters, and social housing. Transformers are reserves of land capable of providing multiple uses through time to accommodate the changing needs of the community, both at a local and a metropolitan scale. The challenge is to define uses for Transformers that are relevant for the communities in the different stages of evolution. For instance a recycling site meant to provide low cost construction materials or communal agricultural patches in early phases of occupation may be suitable for communal services such as health care centres or schools in the near future.

Finally, Stewards are institutions, communal organizations, and even individuals, with some form of physical representation that may appear accompanying both Corridors and Patches. They play an important role in securing the spatial requirements of the public realm and the supplementary uses, as well as ensuring communal engagement, and fostering the transformative processes according to the changing demands, economies of scale associated with much a larger population and complexities of larger urban areas.

The book is conceived in the realm of research by design approach. The adaptability of the IA approach is illustrated through academic examples in very different contexts. It is also a call to politicians, academics and planners for immediate action, and an invitation for further investigation and applied design proposals as pilot projects to demonstrate the value of the IA approach.