The Importance of the Informal

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THE IMPORTANCE OF THE INFORMAL IN THE CITY OF THE FUTURE

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The form of the future city depends, to a large extent, on the outcome of the relations between global ideas of the future and different lives being lived in the present. If, in the West, people live the present through ideas of the future - as articulated through futuristic aspirations of skylines in cities such as Shanghai, Dubai and São Paulo - the question remains: through which perspectives and values will ‘other’ people in the world live their lives? Should cities of the future integrate, tolerate or exclude informal settlements from their fabric? This essay speculates on the future of the informal city in the present and suggests that the relationship between the informal city and the formal city needs to be not just acknowledged, but expanded, if the informal city is to play an optimal role in shaping the city of the future.

From the globally iconic samba performances, to the internet cafes and language programmes of the informal settlements of Rio de Janeiro - where thirty per cent of the city's residents live - we see they are no less ‘global’ or ‘local’ than the formal city, they just stand in different relationships to the globalised world. The Urban Cell project of the Prefeitura do Rio de Janeiro (the Rio Municipality) and the Bauhaus in Germany materialise links from the favelas to the formal city and the world, and back; a reciprocity that points towards a thicker understanding of landscape and its urban role.

Although sceptics claim that globalisation is not at all a new phenomenon and that due to global trade patterns there was probably more global integration in the nineteenth than in the twenty-first century, it is difficult to deny that deep changes have happened in the global order since World War II. Significantly, after 1945 new international institutions were created with the objective of promoting development and regulating relations between nation-states. Among these institutions are the United Nations (UN), the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (now called the World Bank) and regional development banks such as the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB). Together they pursued agendas that saw development as a solution to the problems of the world, promising a future of prosperity and peace. At the same time, many countries embarked upon the task of developing themselves by subjecting their societies to increasingly systematic, detailed and comprehensive interventions, which often did not achieve the expected outcome.

In Rio de Janeiro such aspiration for development was manifest in the attempted systematic eradication of the informal settlements, known locally as favelas. Favelas have been developing in Rio since the 1890s when Providência Hill in the city centre was first colonised by impoverished migrants from the Brazilian northeast. Similar unplanned and undesigned settlements grew and proliferated outside of, yet adjacent to, the formal city for most of the twentieth century; each with its own character reflective of the regional identity of the residents, and some built on the steep hillsides offering majestic views of the formal city and its beaches. The erasures did not work: when a favela was torn down, a new one appeared elsewhere. Through the eradication programme, favelados, as favela residents are known, were pushed farther and farther into the peripheries of the city, a process that not just disrupted their lives but also the economy of the formal city which had come to depend on them for low-income services like laundry, cleaning, and construction work.

Constantinos Doxiadis, the Greek architect and planner, was the key character in the implementation of the post-World War II development strategies in Latin America and the Middle East. While presenting his vision for a developed future involving the eradication of the Rio’s slums over a twenty year period, he claimed to have had the best question put to him of his professional career when in a public meeting someone asked:

“Sir, if your plan is successful, who is going to write the sambas?” This implied that if you eliminate the communities which have given the opportunity to people to express themselves with folk dances and folk songs, who is going to create them? I don’t have
a new generation of left-leaning intellectuals were rising in the city government that a significant shift in policy towards the favelas started. The Prefeitura set about integrating favelas with the formal city and neighbouring landscape. By arguing the benefits to the formal city, initial projects got the go-ahead from the authorities. Improvements included reforestation of hillsides to prevent landslides, the diversion of storm-water run-off, the introduction of sewage systems, and the removal of rubbish from the favelas. The *modus operandi* was developed with daily practice and experience, with traditional notions of landscape and ecology playing a key role in the integration process. In the Morro da Formiga favela, reforestation followed a devastating landslide which killed 80 people in 1976. To this day the reforestation is carefully tended by the locals who themselves manage the forest preventing new developments taking place in the woodland.

The Favela-Bairro programme of the 1990s and early 2000s, funded by the Inter-American Development Bank, may be understood as a more formal advancement of the work started by the Prefeitura in the 1980s, but with a different scope in terms of the type of interventions and the intentional benefit to favelas themselves. Strategies of the programme included the construction of public open spaces and community buildings, the improvement of pedestrian and vehicular circulation routes within the favelas and the improvement of traffic connections with the formal city. The key premise of the Favela-Bairro programme was to turn the marginalised favelas into neighbourhoods (*bairro* means neighbourhood in Portuguese) so they could be further integrated rather than excluded from the formal city fabric. The work...
Jacarezinho is the densest favela in Rio de Janeiro with just 6 square metres per person. Image: Moisés Lino e Silva

Until the 1990s favelas existed outside the state to the extent that they even did not appear on city maps. It is important to note that the informal city in Rio is, even today, usually outside the control of the state. As can be seen from the film City of God and the more recent, Cidade dos Homens (City of Men), parallel organised violence plays a major role in the favela, keeping the state at bay, and paradoxically providing security to residents (provided, of course, that one is lucky enough to avoid a stray bullet). Favelas are gated-communities in extremis. The problems associated with organised violence are, however, a major stumbling block to working in the favelas.

The Favela-Bairro programme came to an end in the early 2000s and has been followed by a number of initiatives, including: POUUOS (Posto de Orientação Urbanística e Social) which aims to legally integrate the favelas with the formal city through street naming thereby giving addresses to houses (allegedly, a favelado gets paid half as much as a formal citizen even if they have the same job), establishing localised building regulations, and in giving title deeds to properties; the Urban Cell project (Célula Urbana) an initiative of the Rio de Janeiro City Government (Prefeitura) and the Bauhaus in Dessau, Germany, which nurtures cells, or catalysts for change, within favelas; PAC – Federal Government funds that are linked to the Brazilian electoral cycle. It was announced in 2007 that US$1.7 billion is to be invested in Rio’s favelas7 and other projects; such as a competition run by the Rio division of the Brazilian Society of Architects, won by Luiz Carlos Toledo, and also a number of other self-initiated projects.

Of the above, the Urban Cell project is particularly promising because it attempts not just to integrate the informal city with the formal, but also vice versa. With 60,000 residents and with just six square metres per person, Jacarezinho is the densest favela in Rio. Social relations are also very dense in Jacarezinho, which has suffered much at the hands of organised violence and drug dealing; both facilitated by the global black market. The Urban Cell project which ran from 2000-2004, consists of a new public building with multi-purpose space; community meeting rooms, classrooms, internet café, and adjacent public squares. While the project follows the Bauhaus’ modernist philosophy of simple and cheap interventions that suit the local conditions and the available budgets, it is still an agent of globalisation in the favela facilitating Spanish and English language classes, providing affordable internet access and computer classes and a offering a link to the outside world that many residents typically miss due to their low incomes.

The project opens up a discussion on the composition of landscape and indeed points towards deeper understandings of what might be considered a landscape. While this is a building, it is a building with a clear spatial agenda, designed to have a catalytic affect on the surrounding social, political, economic and cultural landscapes. Reciprocally some people claim that the building has been contaminated and infected by the favela. Nevertheless the building is a landmark and the internet café has been replicated elsewhere in the Jacarezinho and outside – displaying hybridisation and proliferation. The shortcomings of the project are landscape-related; for instance the planned physical connection to the outside of the favela has not yet been constructed and its absence is blamed for the project not fully meeting its goals.

The Urban Cell points to a strategy that respects the power of the local in face of the global and to a future where the favela may impact on the formal city as much as the city does on the favela. Urban Cell predicts a series of reactions which generate landscapes that are physical, social, political and cultural. It suggests a more robust understanding of landscape, one that goes beyond concerns of open space and ecological concerns to embrace what is considered urban too.

If in the contemporary world it is necessary to have the ability to live ‘post-presently’; the contemporary spatio-temporal anxiety of the West cannot be satisfied with a clear-cut analysis of what globalisation will end up meaning to cultures around the world. Rather than assuming that there will be a homogenised or vastly culturally differentiated world with globalisation, as Rio’s favelas show, there is no reason to assume a passivity of the local in face of the global. Often the global and the local interact to produce different outcomes - clearly this interaction involves power. In some cases local cultures manipulate forces of globalisation for their own benefit, such as the in the case of the samba. In other cases people are diminished by these same forces and enter into a process of change following the values established by the global order. Nevertheless if we were to have a world of increased localities, it is essential that local people have the freedom to actively engage with the global on their own terms. If a more fruitful form of development is to take place, local people need to have the power to successfully articulate their values in the definition of the figured world, or city, where they live.

Urban Cell’s attempts to reach outside the favelas are significant. It is only in seeing the positive value of favelas and in nurturing a dialogue with the world around them, that both the formal and informal city can be reformed. When looking to the favela there is usually a binary assumption that the formal city that surrounds them is good and the favela is bad, or at least undesirable, and that the favela needs to be integrated with the formal city. But one has to ask the question of why, despite the poverty and the violence, do so many favela residents that we encountered not want to live elsewhere? Favelas offer community, social support, financial benefits and, in a way, security (crime practically doesn’t exist in favelas, apart from the organised crime, of course). The prototypical qualities of both need to be emphasised and supported. As Kenneth Frampton – whose argument that landscape is a solution to the problems of the megalopolis was a key motivation behind this research - states: ‘As architects, we need to conceive of future urban interventions in such a way as they have a wide-ranging catalytic effect for a given amount of investment.’ To this end it would be a useful first step to have a catalytic effect on the informal and the formal city and to see them both for what they are: series of interrelated physical and non-physical systems arranged over kilometre-wide areas, ie landscapes.