

Valeria Federighi

The Informal Stance. Representations of architectural design and informal settlements

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Informality has exerted a longstanding and special fascination for architects. Throughout the last hundred years, the unplanned or un-designed has been interpreted as morphological reference, as place of necessary action and as the architectural "other," that is, as instance of alternative urbanities and everyday practices, which might put the profession into crisis and stimulate new conceptual horizons. Over the past two decades, a special interest coming from architectural practice and theory alike has coagulated around encounters between design and informal settlements.

This has generated an "informal architecture" constituted of small-scale disciplinary means, or polite practices, as well as a series of converging discourses, questioning or trying to change the socio-political and professional landscape. These were produced most often in curated events and publications which concentrated varied directions, projects and processes, in an attempt to offer common identities and representations. Valeria Federighi's book proposes a very useful and necessary epistemological examination of such representations. The book is triggered by the scientific difficulty in approaching the relationship between architecture and informality, all the more disarming in an era of global flows and interwoven determinations.

The book is organized around a careful survey of the main issues and crucial curatorial events (mostly publications and exhibitions) having approached the subject, which the author synthesizes into several moments of convergence.

The first part of the book illustrates the incompatibility between representations which concentrate on informal settlements either as local phenomena improved by on-the-ground measures, or as product of global forces that can be measured statistically, but not transformed. In this sense, two writings draw the foundation of the book and illustrate these opposing stances. On the one hand, in Alfredo Brillembourg and Hubert Klumpner's *Informal Cities: Caracas Case* (2005), a rhetoric of on-the-ground engagement and social change frames the informal city as a site for small-scale or limited intervention. On the other hand, Rem Koolhaas' research on Lagos with the Harvard Project on the City, published in *Mutations* (2000), offers an abstract, data-informed, pragmatic perspective that places informal cities in a global context, while distancing them from the world and from any meaningful intervention. This becomes one of the main issues of the book, as it searches for representations which connect both scales, creating local change while also being effective on a global level, addressing larger causes of social and economic inequalities. On a representational level, the impasse between these individualizing and universalizing perspectives is surpassed progressively through the inclusion of the issues in wider narratives contesting the causes and spatial effects of neoliberal policies, while also questioning the possibility of connecting the informal dimension with that of design.

This marks an important shift in the international discourse, from architectural representations of informal settlements to a more introspective look at architectural practice itself, by way of the role that informality plays in the way design tools are deployed. In other words, in its second section,

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of Architectural Design
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the book turns from the informal city as site of change to the project and the architectural profession as possible vehicles of such change. Throughout, the question of disciplinary belonging becomes increasingly pertinent: as informal architecture tends to define itself in opposition to mainstream design practices, recent representations have tried to formulate a common project for converging discourses which are socially relevant. For this purpose, informal architecture is integrated as a subset of other practices, such as social architecture, and the focus turns to the meaning of the built object, first, and then toward the practitioner as channel of empowerment of situations out of his control.

This is brought to a highpoint in the final chapter, which shows the consequences of informality entering the mainstream discourse and practice – as can be seen in the past years through its presence as subject in a plethora of Biennales, other international exhibitions, publications, academic research and even as site or travel destination for numerous university design studios. The author shows that one interesting evolution is that the place of informality has shifted in its representation, from secondary subject attached to a more encompassing one, towards a means of conveying newer or lesser known concepts and architectural manifestations, such as scarcity. This entails that informality is more than a condition, a place or a subject of interest for architecture, it has also become a possible result of design, not as unintentional by-product, but rather as anticipated outcome. Therefore, the book's balanced approach manages to avoid narrow ideologies by finally including informal architecture into a spectrum of other design practices, ranging from the production of autonomous objects to social engagement, spectrum which spans to include diverse positions, processes and places that the reader is left to judge for himself in the global setting that the author describes throughout her research. This is all the more admirable and nuanced when dealing with an action-oriented current, sometimes tempted by simplistic political discourses or self-gratification through intervention.

For the moment, the main issue remains open, as the author admits herself with some regret: it is yet unclear how and if informal architecture “may put disciplinary tools at work within the real world of transnational flows and connectivity”. However, the progressive theoretical shift from urban informality to governance and citizenship that the research examines may just indicate significant development, such as networks on intermediary scales: not transnational, but “trans-local”¹ exchanges of ideas and concrete experiences determined by precise contexts. These remain to be included in such an epistemological approach.

Representation is shown to be a coherent and very useful conduit for deciphering still evolving architectural positions dealing with the informal city, alternative practices and the profession itself. Also it proves to be a very practical instrument that allows the author to compare what would have otherwise been very hard to assess: very different concepts and expressions, although sometimes reduced only to their main discourse, form here a necessary theoretical threading of architectural positions more usually involved in actions than criticality.

A welcomed and interesting contribution to the analysis, which allows for comparisons between types of discourses, are the diachronic charts and the synchronic mappings at the beginning of each chapter. They illustrate a practical synthesis of ideas through subsequent publications and exhibitions, and, respectively, the evolving fluxes of actions and exchanges of ideas between different regions, by locating designers and projects around the world. Also, dealing with discourse, special importance is given in each chapter to a careful analysis of recurring semantic structures which may bias architectural positions and production. Though the minute analysis of potential meanings and preconceptions may sometimes destabilize the reader, it also proves to be of great use when dealing with key terms with no precise definition – such as “informal” itself or “slum.” While all of this produces a quite abstract study, ostensibly lacking concrete examples, it must be said once again that most content dealing with informality chooses the exact opposite route, concentrating on projects (objects or processes) curated to express a single critical vision.

¹ See for example Doina Petrescu, Constantin Petcou, and Nishat Awan, eds., *Trans-Local-Act: Cultural practices within and across* (Paris: aaa/peprav, 2010), or the more recent Kathrin Böhm, Tom James, and Doina Petrescu, eds., *Learn to Act. Introducing the Eco Nomadic School* (Paris: aaa/peprav, 2017).

In fact, the book operates a similar procedure, only with curated concepts and representations instead of concrete projects, that is, it curates these precise critical visions, showing their commonalities and evolutions. In so doing, Valeria Federighi has written a book useful to both those already involved with informal architecture, as well as those in search of a theoretical introduction to the subject and its main moments.

While reviewing the book in a country where contemporary architecture is mostly governed by the market and has kept its distance from critical approaches or involvement in seemingly extra-disciplinary issues, one cannot help but see parallels to the local informal landscape. In Romania, as well as other post-communist countries, local informal settlements remain under the radar of most architects and public administrations, and they are in direct (theoretical) competition with a very visible and omnipresent bricolage. The planned city is itself a scene of informality, both built and unbuilt, very relevant to the profession. Here too, the common thread of urban spontaneity surpasses the physical presence of such phenomena and expresses symptoms of wider abstract contexts and scales. Valeria Federighi's research thus has a larger validity, which may become surprisingly personal to the reader. In so doing, it may connect diverse and perhaps faraway concepts with immediate realities and lead to an active questioning of present circumstances, both local and global.