The Informal City in the age of the New Urban Agenda: time to challenge the narrative

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The world is rapidly urbanising with the UN estimating that populations living in urban areas will reach 66% worldwide by 2050 with almost 90% of that growth concentrated in Asia and Africa. In addition to that much of this urbanisation will occur in the form of what is currently called informal settlements. Megacities such as Cairo will see the largest growths, with 60-70% of its current population living in such settlements. The question now stands with urban populations swelling and living in informal settlements, how can we continue to call them “in”formal? When something constitutes the majority configuration of a form, has it not become the form itself?

That was the challenge presented to students at RIBA in July as they contemplated the future of our cities in the age of the New Urban Agenda, which calls for, among other things, equality, diversity, justice and a right to the city. As part of RIBA’s International Week these students were invited to participate in a Masterclass and Design Charette around the topic of the future of specifically four “cities”: the Historic City, the City Annex, the City from Scratch and the Informal City.

Among those presenting was Ben Bolgar, Senior Director at the Prince’s Foundation for Building Community, responsible with his Foundation colleagues and Nicolas Galarza from NYU Marron Institute for Urban Management, for the City Annex group.

He presented the Foundation’s intriguingly simple, yet effective approach of “bare-bones” planning, which established a rather interesting, and according to the examples presented, quite successful middle ground to the current binary extremes of pre-planned expansive satellite ghost towns and informal urban sprawl. Yet to be applied in the Egyptian context, the Foundation’s toolkit nevertheless seems an interesting and relevant prospect for experimentation in Cairo’s informal settlements, something I intend to pursue in the coming academic year in this the living urban laboratory that is the city of Cairo. It is these types of middle ground solutions that seem to be the way forward for many of our urban problems.

As for my own group, I was, along with Julio Davila of UCL Bartlett, responsible for this investigation of the Informal City.

Part of our charge was to formulate a five-point manifesto and illustrate that manifesto through our cities, in our case Cairo and Mumbai. My group of 7 very energetic and excited students came from all over the world- India, Egypt, the UK, Nigeria, Spain and the Bahamas.

Very quickly it became apparent that the central theme of our work would be challenging the narrative. Questions abound: to define what is informal we must first decide what is formal- Is it about geometry? Order? Pre-determination? Legality? the three “o”s of ownership, occupation, operation? Who gets to decide? And most importantly if something constitutes the largest majority by far of the world’s built environment how can we continue to define it as an opposite of the normative construct of form? Has it now actually become the form?

What then is the role of the architect? How can we rethink it? Are we to become moderators, negotiators, empowerers, advocates between communities as they navigate this new space?

What new ways can we develop to define this city if not the informal? Is it a self-made city, a spontaneous city, a kinetic city, a permanently temporary city, a city that is intentionally incomplete?
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The group decided as a consequence of these questions to at least refer to our city as the (In)Formal, a sort of semantic and visual challenge and provocation to the mainstream urban narrative.

These semantic provocations became a thread across the discussions, and being in London we adopted the Shakespearean tradition of making up new words. Primarily these new words were action words, such as “spectrumising” to describe challenging more binary, either/or notions, and “othering” which described the action of ascribing, often rather unfairly or forcibly, the state of “other” on an urban condition or group of people.

Perhaps it was the international mix of primarily non-English native speakers that allowed us this liberty, but regardless of rationale it was indeed liberating and allowed us to expand and challenge our understandings.

The resultant 5-point manifesto, and our call to arms left the group energised to look at their, and other cities differently, to challenge the current urban narrative further and work to legitimise what works in these spontaneous/kinetic/self-organised cities.

Students left with a desire to look for a spectrum of ways to engage with urbanism beyond the binary that has classically been presented to them, to look for ways to weave solutions between the patterns and energies of current communities, rather than to impose imported understandings upon them.

They left of course with more questions than answers. In this, at least, we were successful in challenging current understandings and norms in urban development.