Creating a simple to use methodology for tackling rapid urbanisation

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I was fortunate to be invited to participate in RIBA’s International Week, co-leading a Student Charette with my colleagues from the Prince’s Foundation for Building Community. The Charrette’s objective was to test a methodology to help Planning officials and municipal authorities conduct and implement simple plans to address rapid urbanisation.

We wanted to explore whether cities with limited resources and capacities can foster development by making minimal arrangements to secure the provision of basic infrastructure and public spaces on the fringes of cities before development happens. This has been the focus of the Urban Expansion Program at the Marron Institute of Urban Management at New York University, where we are currently developing a partnership with the Prince’s Foundation to promote this topic in several Commonwealth countries.

Having participated in a number of workshops on the subject, this last one hosted by RIBA was pretty different from what I’m used to. Normally as a planner I see from afar the logic and principles of design based planning. This time however was quite special, working hand-in-hand with students with a background in urban architecture and urban design allowed me to learn from that perspective and to improve my understanding of the logic and the method of architects.

Taking a bit of distance from my daily job as a researcher and immersing myself in carrying out the instructions established as the methodology allowed me to put myself in the position of some of the practitioners that we have trained in a number of cities in Africa and Latin America.

As of now we never tried to develop a toolkit or a manual to help municipalities implement plans for rapid urbanisation, our approach relies on doing work in the field, which is very efficient but also more costly, so thinking along the lines of a methodology that could be replicated with no close supervision and training was certainly appealing, but at the same time it imposed a challenge.

This charrette provided an opportunity to see if what had been developed was actually simple enough for a municipal officer with no training in design, planning or architecture to implement.

We had the chance of dedicating a few days to carrying out the instructions in the manual and came to some very insightful conclusions. First, we understood that the process could not be a linear one in the sense that you start to form the highest scale (City level) and end up with the smallest scale
(block level) and make sure all details are factored in on the plan. Since we are aiming to provide tools to municipal officials we need to understand that the process of urbanisation is gradual, and in the case of intermediate cities in developing countries, neighbourhoods and communities are developed more organically and not following a strict plan. For that reason we had to go back to the idea of a bare bones approach to planning where we mainly focus on Blue, Green and public infrastructure at the highest scale and then provide guidelines for further detail in the case that there is interest and funding to implement a more detailed plan.

So often the end product is a very detailed plan and this has the effect of discouraging officials that are aware of the limitations they have. For that reason we learned that we had to strike a middle point, focusing on the bare bones of the city that will be developed in the future.

Another interesting discussion that emerged was predetermining densities by design. The barebones approach we are promoting calls for flexibility in land use regulations. In this way, the plans designed by officials can adapt to the demands of the market.

This was a very interesting exercise that helped us to have a realistic assessment of how feasible it could be for officials to follow the guidelines of the Prince’s Foundation toolkit for Rapid Urbanisation. Additionally, although this was only one of the four groups that conducted a similar activity, the academic exchange that happened with our colleagues from IE in Spain, American University of Cairo and the University Colleague London further contributed to our exercise and the discussion around rapid urbanisation.