RIBA International Week

Applying the Prince’s Foundation’s toolkit to Spanish Town

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I took part in the RIBA International Week Masterclasses and charrette that focused on the growth of informal and formal cities. Four separate groups were formed at the beginning of the week, each with a different theme. Our group “The City Annex” focused primarily on testing the toolkit developed by the Prince’s Foundation which seeks to support planners, architects and urban designers in less developed nations around the world.

Because of time constraints our group could only look at stages 3 and 4 of the toolkit. This still however allowed us to go through a proper testing of these two stages.

The site we were given was Spanish Town in Jamaica. Spanish Town is currently suffering unplanned informal settlement. Using the toolkit we began by establishing the key fixes or constraints, such as areas prone to flooding, areas of natural significance and areas that have already been developed. We went on to map the established centres with key civic buildings and walkable radiuses from 500m and 1km.

This information then provided us with the base information for the next stage, where we looked at select areas for potential new development. We ended with a block and road structure, hierarchy and phasing plans.

In the week we managed to engaged meaningfully with subject matter that could potentially make a big difference in the Caribbean, the Commonwealth and across the world. The process the toolkit outlines, and the simple means of producing maps using trace and layering different plans is simple enough for a variety of non-professionals to use and adapts to a variety of contexts that the toolkit could be used in. It can also be taken to greater levels of complexity if the skills and resources are available for the user.

We concluded that the toolkit is perfectly applicable in different urban environments that lack the basic resources to assist in planning for rapid growth. In the very least it provides a framework for the location of urban growth and the protection of key resources. The stages of the toolkit just need to be calibrated to the specific nature of the place in which they are being tested. As a group we also discovered through various discussions that the use of the toolkit needs to be calibrated to its given context in order that the density, character and established urban vernacular patterns are responded to in the proper manner.

The tool can also be considered as a very useful teaching instrument, not only for planners and or people in higher positions but for students who lack a basic
understanding of universal planning principals. Such as walkability, block structure, massing and hierarchy of streets and public spaces.