On Informality -
Programmed Spontaneity in Spatial Design

By Paulo Guerreiro[*]

In the history of European-based classical architecture, the concept of formalism has often been understood as a deviation from canonical form. Until the cultural changes introduced by the Romantic movement in the nineteenth century, the repetition of established formal rules was prevalent in architectural theory and practice. However, the last two hundred years have shown an increasing fascination with the possibility of incorporating the features of "architecture without architects" in the discourse and practice of conventional design, progressively codifying them into theoretical and formal canons. On an urban and territorial scale, the formal characteristics of the so-called informal settlements are currently being systematised and subsequently replicated in design practice. This is exacerbated by market economy and by the broad subject of taste. The aesthetic of spontaneity and the induction of informality have become established architectural concepts, criteria and goals. The differences between the needs of rapidly expanding built territories (in rich or in poor contexts) and those which face mainly punctual adaptations have become clearer, as they often require conflicting approaches. Therefore, the degree of informality enabled in the design process and desired as a design purpose is a key conceptual and practical factor in contemporary spatial planning.

Introduction

The history of European-based architecture (that is, the architecture created in Europe or whose fundamental principles stem from European sources, either by cultural influence or by direct colonial intervention) has been strongly influenced by the notion of *correct* or *ideal* form. This has been an essential feature of architectural thought and practice, associated to the idea of behavioural and formal canon. However, a fundamental conceptual and practical shift occurred as a result of the Picturesque and Romantic movements in Europe, which questioned the classical principles of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. The consequences of these divergences are still mirrored today.

The concepts of formal and informal are not exclusive to spatial planning. They are broad cultural concepts that precede spatial creation and their physical expression can only be inferred through interpretation.

The basic premise of this article is that contemporary architecture and urbanism pursue formal, typological and aesthetic associations with what is traditionally understood as *informal building*. The sources and implications of this apparent kinship can be read as a part of a comprehensive cultural phenomenon.

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Literature Review

The argument will be constructed based on four main bibliographic groups.

The first provides the fundamental theoretical backbone of the text, as it presented a source field which is chronologically broad (either due to the initial publication date or to the historical period and subject matter focused on the bibliography) but also conceptually dense and contradictory enough to work as a suitable introduction. The texts by Cache (1995), Norberg-Schulz (1980) and Mallgrave/Ikonomu (1994) are references for their questioning of the relations between subject, object and context in architecture. The works by Lucan (2011) and Macarthur (2007) provide a historical outline of the fluctuations in architectural composition motivated by both classical and picturesque principles.

The second group overviews the territorial scale and the diluting borders between *rural* and *urban*. The work coordinated by Dovey (2020) questions the concept of *informal settlement* and its application, an endeavour which the present article also embarks on. The work by Schröder et al. (2017) expands on the idea that urbanity and rurality are increasingly intertwined realities to which planners need to adapt to. The interpretation of this territorial scale is further backed, in the present argument, by the work by Mehrotra/Vera/Mayoral (2017), in which the idea of permanence as an indispensable requirement for urbanism is challenged.

The third group of sources is constituted by interviews, monographs or project descriptions by currently practising planners. These are understood as conjunctural publications, that is, texts which were chosen either because they focus on specific current projects (the Paraisópolis project by Christian Kerez, for example) or they express more a sense of *Zeitgeist* than an intention of in-depth historical review (the monograph of Portuguese architecture studio FALA, for instance).

The fourth bibliographic group comprises statistical data compiled by the platform "Our World in Data" from different sources. Some references comprise text which is not written in English; in such cases, the present article proposes a translation.

Methodology and Goals

As it is impossible to know and interpret every nuance of every theoretical view on the matters at hand, the present text focuses on the idea of formalism mentioned by Ernesto Nathan Rogers, according to which formalism is the use of "non-assimilated forms."[1] These words were written in a context of re-appreciation of the principles of Modern architecture and this pivotal aspect justifies the choice of such basis for the argument.

The present article is structured in five main chapters: "formalism", "spontaneity", "integration", "words" and "replica". It is constructed by providing

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1. Rogers, "L'evoluzione dell'architetteura: Risposta al custode dei frigidaires," *Casabella - Continuità*, no. 228 (1959), *cit. in* Rodrigues, *O mundo ordenado e acessível das formas da arquitectura. Tradição Clássica e Movimento Moderno na Arquitectura Portuguesa: dois exemplos*, 2013, 28.

a historical overview of the evolution of those concepts, while simultaneously proposing a possible operative meaning for them. The argument is illustrated by purely conceptual considerations but also by mentioning physical objects (mainly built, at different scales). The theoretical and speculative aspect of the text is its main component, with the case-studies acting as complements to the argument.

The case of Luanda is considered in greater depth. This article does not claim that this city is necessarily an exceptional case in Africa, and a detailed comparison with other continental examples is not its purpose. The case-study was chosen so that a situation that is known from personal experience can be documented, adding critical insight to the existing bibliography on it. The city`s expansion through the so-called *informal settlements* is particularly focused and the questioning of this expression is a fundamental purpose of the text.

This article proposes that *informal design* is that which purposefully intends to suggest informal behaviours (regardless of epoch and the type of architecture). The text attempts to demonstrate how the concept of informality has been conceived and materialised in architecture and territorial planning, and also to reflect on how these disciplines articulate the ideas of "universal" and "particular".[2]

Ultimately, the goal is to propose that the concept of informality is fundamental to understand the main dynamics in architecture in the last two hundred years and in contemporary theory and practice. The article hypothesises that the suggestion of informality is currently such a vital project criteria as formal canon was during the majority of Western-based architectural history.

The Argument

Formalism

The conception that something is *formal*, in general terms, refers to the idea of protocol, of behavioural rule or social etiquette. The term *informal*, on the other hand, connects one to concession, softening pre-established rules of demeanour. However, a problematic concept arises in the context of architectural theory: formalism.

In the history of European-based classical architecture, the concept of formalism has often been understood as a deviation from canonical or appropriate form.[3] Consider the following words by Ernesto Nathan Rogers about it:

> "(…) Formalism is any use of non-assimilated forms: the ancient, the contemporary, the cultured or the spontaneous."[4]

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2. These terms refer here to Slavoj Žižek`s conception of universality. Variations of these concepts of "universal" and "particular" will be repeated in the present argument, investigating how they relate to architectural and cultural notions of continuity, tradition and character through different epochs, and namely in contemporary planning.

3. Read, for example, Viollet-le-Duc's definition of "clarity" as "the proper application of form to its object", a fundamental goal to be pursued, according to this author. Viollet-le-Duc, *cit. in* Whitehead (trad.): *Eugêne Viollet-le-Duc. The foundations of architecture. Selections from the Dictionnaire raisonné*, 1990, 256.

Although this is not the only possible definition of formalism, it arguably expresses the general tone of classical architecture`s theory on this matter. If interpreted within the context of architectural history, of the theoretical discussions on classical form and especially on that of classicism as a general approach, these words imply that formalism is a somewhat frivolous attitude of deviation from canon (methodological, practical or constructive), a sort of short-lasting superficiality, when compared to the validity of the formulae and shapes tested by time.[5]

One of the prevailing principles of classical European-based architecture is that of *order*. On the one hand, this concept relates literally to the classical Greek and Roman orders that defined the features of the elements of architecture, namely the columns (and, consequently, that of the other elements which derived from the columns' proportions); on the other, it also expresses the symbolical goal of inter-relating every element of a given design or building in a globally coherent, interconnected and inseparable way[6] (Figure 1).

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4. Rogers, In Rodrigues, *op. cit.*, 28.

5. For instance, the production of architectural treatises exemplified this underlying constituent of the classical spirit in architecture. From Vitruvius to Alberti, from Serlio to Le Corbusier, classical architects based their approach on the idea that "(…) There will always be a superior spirit (…) that will free architectural art from strange elements and that will give us back the classic and pure way of building. (…) A constant and lasting measure (…)." Loos, "La vieja tendencia y la nueva en el arte de construir (Die alte und die neue Richtung in der Baukunst)" in *Escritos*, 2004, 123-124.

6. The following passage by Heinrich Wöllflin sums up this idea clearly: "Quite early in the Renaissance the theory was formulated that the sign of perfection in a work of art was that it could not be changed, not even in the smallest detail, without destroying the beauty and meaning of the whole. That this rule was formally recognised as early as the mid-fifteenth century is perhaps the most significant factor in the development of Italian art towards the classical ideal. Its formulator was the great Leon Battista Alberti. The classic passage from his *De re aedificatoria* reads as follows: '(…) I shall define beauty to be a harmony of all the parts […], fitted together with such proportion and connection, that nothing could be added, diminished or altered, but for the worse..'" Wölfflin, *Renaissance and Baroque*, 1964, 65.

Figure 1. *Planned Formality. André Le Nôtre. Garden of the Palace of Versailles. Cartography by Jean Delagrive, 1746*
Source: BnF, Bibliothèque nationale de France.

In the more orthodox architectural classicism, formalism is not interpreted as an attitude of approximation to the common idea of *formal* (understood as canon or behavioural rule) but, on the contrary, it represents the distance from convention. In this context, despite the familiarity between the two terms, formalism is not a way of following formal etiquette, but rather an alternative to traditional or canonical formality.

For example, if one takes Le Corbusier`s work as a basis for analysis, due to the almost undisputable fact that he was the most broadly influential architect of the twentieth century, one can identify some of the features that characterise this co-habitation of formal and informal design features. In small-scale buildings such as his villas, Le Corbusier combined the more or less subtle suggestions of new lifestyles for a *new Man* (implying a break with the past) with the recurrence of formal models of classical architecture such as the piano nobile or the general proportions of the building.[7] If the sublimation of the internal walls suggested a decreasing rigidity (physical as well as social), the somewhat pompous concept of architectural promenade relates to a sense of formality. In his large-scale projects such as the Ville Radieuse, the Swiss architect also advocated the liberation from the spatial, moral and behavioural constraints of the traditional city, but did it

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7. For a systematised interpretation of Le Corbusier's villas see Samuel, *Le Corbusier and the architectural promenade*, 2010. According to the Samuel's description, stairs and ramps play a key role in the compositional system of the promenade, introducing a choreographed ascension through the buildings and acting as devices to communicate a classical sense of ceremonial formality. To quote José Baltanás about Villa Savoye's ramp, this device "transforms walking into ritual, dignifying the space (…)", establishing a modernist kinetic canon of formality in this type of building. Baltanás, *cit. in* Samuel, *op. cit.,* 119.

according to clear formal guidelines, something which represents a fundamentally formal attitude. Corbusian buildings (his villas, in particular) were, then, profoundly classical buildings, both in their moral and in their compositional principles.[8] The suggestion of informal behaviour was implied and did not require a neglect of classical forms, principles and methods. By comparison, what the current argument will try to demonstrate is that contemporary spatial planning pursues a more direct expression of behavioural informality which, contrary to classical architecture, is attempted by associating it to spatial and material features that distance themselves from the ideas of formal, classical or canonical. In other words, contemporary spatial planning pursues an immediate visual correspondence between *informal space*, *informal shape* and *informal behaviour*. It is important, then, to clarify what one understands as *informal space* and to what degree this correspondence between formal canon and behavioural canon is visible.

Nowadays, the idea of formal canon in architecture is diluted and an underlying debate between the ideas of norm and exceptionality has been established. Arguably, this dilution also applies to the idea of behavioural canon in human societies. This is particularly evident when subjects such as identity politics, political correctness or individual liberties are discussed. The main conflicts that arise from this weakening of the sense of norm stem, perhaps, from the circumstance that the borders between norm and exception are unclear and ever-changing. In other words, informal behaviour (which in principle corresponds to an expression of particular or individual motivations) does not occur isolated from formal settings and it is not impenetrable to the universal conditions in and around it. Accordingly, *informal spaces* are not immutable entities that are separate from the rules of formal backgrounds, and vice-versa.

In architecture and landscape planning, the main conceptual shifts in the interpretation of the idea of formal rule occurred by the end of the eighteenth century, with the advent of the Picturesque Movement in Europe[9] and, later, with the development of the Romantic Movement.

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8. On Le Corbusier`s conceptual classicity, read the footnote 5 concerning Alberti's definition of "beauty" and the "harmony of all the parts", which also applies in this case. Regarding Le Corbusier`s compositional principles, Jacques Lucan`s comments on the predominance of the floorplan in Beaux-Arts architecture in the end of the nineteenth century are eloquent: "It is the plan that reconciles all the program's demands; it is the plan that contains the creative thought of the architect; it is the plan that is the criterion by which specific individuals first judge the real value of the composition. (…)" (*Dictionnaire de l'Academie de beaux-arts* (1884), *cit. in* Lucan, C*omposition, Non-Composition. Architecture and Theory in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, 2011, 185). According to Lucan, the predominance of the plan is a fundamental principle in French architectural tradition over a period of three centuries. One could argue that this traditional predominance is at the core of the well-known expression by Le Corbusier, according to which the "plan is the generator" of architecture. Le Corbusier, *Toward an architecture*, 1923.

9. "The term picturesque was first used to describe the aesthetic view of nature (…). The word as borrowed from the Italian *pittoresco* or the French *pittoresque,* meaning 'in the manner of painters'. (…) The word is inextricable from the rise of the genre of painting called 'landscape'. Our current use of the word landscape to mean an appreciation of the world as if it were a visual artefact is the result of the meeting of the picturesque concept with gardening." Macarthur, *Picturesque: Architecture, disgust and other irregularities*, 2007, 24.

Regarding the visual characteristics of the projects, the fundamental change related to what Nikolaus Pevsner described as the focus on "visual planning", opposed to the pre-Picturesque focus on the canonical geometries of two-dimensional elements.[10] On a conceptual level, these shifts can be summarised by the growing importance attributed to personal emotion, rather than to reason and to universal ideals, in the appreciation of the characteristics of a given project, building or space[11] (Figure 2).

Figure 2. *Planned Informality. Frederik Olmsted and Calvert Vaux. Central Park, Manhattan, New York. Plan, 1868*
Source: "Geographicus Rare Antique Maps" via Wikimedia Commons.

This focus on personal emotion inherited by the cultural revolutions of the nineteenth century is behind the current discussion on the comparative weights of individual aspirations and collective models in spatial design.

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10. According to Pevsner, the consequences of this model based on picturesque principles can be summed up by the idea that visual planning is a means of conceiving a relationship of sequential views for an observer in motion. "(…) [Visual] Planning should serve the views it creates, and planners and architects should think in terms of human engagement in sequences of views rather than with orthographic plans that represent abstractions." Aitchison, Macarthur, In Pevsner, *Visual Planning and the Picturesque*, 2010, 20.

11. Regarding this matter, refer to August Schmarsow's work and the theory of *Einfühlung* or "empathy", which introduced changes in the appreciation of forms and their value, as well as an aesthetic reconsideration of the concept of beauty. See Schmarsow, "The essence of architectural creation," in Mallgrave, Ikonomou, *Empathy, Form and Space. Problems in German aesthetics 1873 – 1893,* 1994.

Spontaneity

Figure 3. Informal *Event on a* Formal *Background. Milan, 2011*
Photography: Paulo Guerreiro.

Going back to Ernesto Nathan Rogers' definition of formalism, one can identify strong oppositions implicit in his choice of the adjectives.

The first duality proposed by Rogers lives in the words "ancient" and "contemporary", chosen in order to imply that formalism can occur regardless of epoch. Arguably, this choice has a double meaning. On the one hand, it suggests that formalism is timeless, meaning that it can happen in different historical epochs. On the other, it means that both ancient and contemporary forms can be used or appropriated in one`s present time. These suggestions reinforce Rogers' implied criticism of formalism as a somewhat perverse attitude.

The second opposition, between "cultured" and "spontaneous", is especially interesting. Why is the word "spontaneous" chosen as an opposite of "cultured"? Arguably, this antagonism is related to the assumption that "cultured" is equivalent to *educated*. By the same token, a cultured behaviour is an educated and, ultimately, formal type of demeanour. According to this line of thought, if a cultured entity corresponds to formal adequacy, a spontaneous entity would correspond, by contrast, to informality. This is particularly relevant because spatial planning is not immune to the immense variety of life aspirations, aesthetic affinities and financial means of individuals and groups. Consequently, it is also not impermeable to their receptivity to the idea of norm or, alternatively, to their expectation for offers of novelty. In this sense, if one interprets the application of the theory of empathy to spatial planning, than the notion of spatial appropriation and personalisation becomes more clearly understandable[12] (Figures 3, 4 and 5).

12. According to Schmarsow "(…) the origin and innermost essence of architecture" relates to an "aesthetic 'from within'", in which the "(…) aesthetic contemplation of our simplest forms – the psychological explanation of their immediate impression or play of associative factors – already takes as its starting point the creative and appreciative subject." (Schmarsow, *op. cit*., 282-283). The

Figure 4. Informal *Appropriation of a Classical* Formal *Boulevard. Lisboa. 1992*
*Source:* António Barreto: fotografias.

Figure 5. *Space Originally Planned as a Trigger for Informality. Bath, 1992*
Source: António Barreto: fotografias.

introduction of the word "impression" should be underlined, as it reveals the difference between cause and effect in the theory of empathy. In Schmarsow`s view, "expression" comes from the object and "impression" is the effect that it causes in the subject. In such terms, this would explain the expectation to see the subject's individual affinities reflected in the object (or "space", in other words). Arguably, the progressive valorisation of this sort of relationship is at the base of the increasing value attributed to individual experience in spatial planning.

With regard to programmatic and functional aspects of spatial planning, namely in buildings, a good archetype to mention is that of the "living room". The evolution of this concept demonstrates how the notion of individuality slowly permeated architecture in the last two and half centuries as a counterpoint to the idea of universal principles, traditionally dominant in classical architecture (including every major cultural movement conceptually affiliated with the classical model, prior or subsequent to the advent of the Picturesque movement, such as the dominant variants in twentieth century's modernist movement[13]).
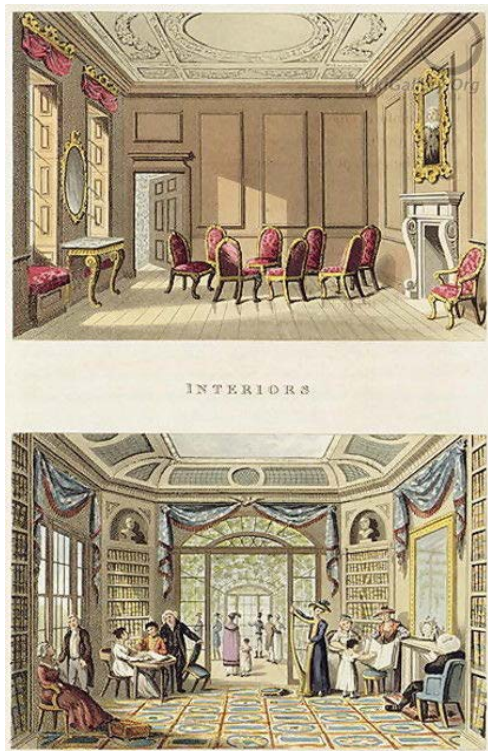
Figure 6. "*Living Room". Humphry Repton. "Interiors: The Old Cedar Parlour and The Modern Living Room", In Fragments on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening, 1816*
Source: Wikigallery (Note: Cropped Image).

According to John Macarthur, the concept of "living room" was developed in the context of the English Picturesque movement, particularly through the work of Humphry Repton (Figure 6), as a reaction to the classical logic of creating sequences of thematic rooms, as the following passage details:

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13. António Santos Leite's comments on Le Corbusier`s references to an "abstract Man" eloquently explore how the "differentiation between the conception of a 'generically abstract' Man of the modern movement and the 'individual Man' of the Romantic can be one of the key points to understand the possible affinities between this cultural matrix [related to the Romantic movement] and 'postmodernism' because the latter, like the former, implicitly legitimises the subjectivity of 'individual and cultural differentiation' as core values (…)" Leite, *A casa romântica; Uma matriz para a contemporaneidade*, 2015, 349

> "(…) [Humphry] Repton uses the word 'living-room' self-consciously [in his 1816 book *Fragments on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening*] as the neologism it was at the time. The proposal of a room not for a specific function but for 'living' implies a place for the whole of the self and a liberal interaction between persons in the room, free from social hierarchy. (…)"[14]

Repton's interiors can be understood as a rejection of earlier planning strategies and techniques, namely those influenced by the Renaissance or specifically by Palladian models.[15]

The development of this species of space can also be explained by the social differences motivated by the transition from feudal structures to mainly bourgeois and industrial societies in Europe.[16] While medieval feudal social organisations resulted in the circumstance that dwellings were mostly communal spaces which did not allow for a great deal of individuality (whether by cultural reasons or simply due the sheer size of the dwellings in proportion to the family units which lived in them), the French Revolution and the Romantic period reinforced the notion that domestic space should allow for individual expression. These changes translated the way in which the ideas of *spontaneity* and *individualisation* progressively integrated planners' concerns in their formal, systematised practice (Figures 7 and 8).

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14. Macarthur, *op. cit.*, 141-142.

15. With regard to Repton's compositional principles read the following words by Robin Evans: "By emphasizing formed visual experience, the relation of internal and external spaces, and multiple activities and territories within a room, Repton's plan required no recognizable geometric figure (…)" (Evans, "Figures, doors, passages," in *Translations from drawing to building and other essays*, 1997 *cit. in* Macarthur, *op. cit.*, 141-142). This dilution of the classical pre-requisite of "recognizable geometric figures" would be further developed and is common in contemporary architecture, to a great extent.

16. In this regard read "Privacy and the idea of family in the determination of domestic space" in Leite, *op.cit.*, 38-48.

Figures 7 and 8. *Domestic, Unspoken Informality: Process or Goal? FALA, Houses in Rua Faria Guimarães (left) and Rua do Paraíso (right)*
Source: FALA. © FALA (left) and © Ricardo Loureiro (right).

A common understanding of the term *spontaneous* is that it translates a pure expression of individual and cultural emotions, one without the filtering of erudition. In spatial design specifically, spontaneous elements are often understood as those which are unpredicted in the process of designing, one that presupposes a project meant to go in a certain pre-determined direction. Bernard Rudofsky's "Architecture without architects"[17] solidified the growing cultural fascination with the idea of spontaneity and spontaneously grown objects. This is an idea often associated, on the one hand, to the general concept of *genius loci*[18] and, on the other, to a vernacular aesthetic with many formal traces that are esteemed by the advocates of the Picturesque.

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17. Rudofsky, *Architecture without architects. An Introduction to Non-Pedigreed Architecture.* 1964.

18. Norberg-Schulz, *Genius Loci. Towards a phenomenology of architecture*, 1980. An eloquent counterpoint to Norberg-Schulz's theory can be found in Bernard Cache's work, where the latter summarises architects' traditional attitude towards the concept of "site" and "pre-existing character" (largely inherited by the idea of *genius loci* summed up by Norberg-Schulz in his seminal work), and proposes an alternative to it. See Cache, *Earth moves. The furnishing of territories*, 1995.

Integration

How does planning (and specifically contemporary spatial planning and building, at different scales) cope with the interaction between the sense of individual emotion and the sheer scale of human population and its settlements? How are these two aspects articulated in the framework of contemporary design thinking?

The attempt to suggest connotations with informality has been increasingly exacerbated by the subject of *taste* and also by the development of consumerist market economy (that is, by the competition for notoriety). These two aspects are deeply intertwined, as the development of the former supported and boosted the expansion of the latter, and vice-versa.

The first aspect, *taste*, has developed in Western architectural theory in contrast with the notion of ideal or canonical forms. Concepts such as *taste* or *style* have mainly been seen as meaningful when the affinity with the classical principle of canonical form shows signs of erosion.[19] In other words, a purposeful expression of the idea of personal taste is especially visible when it superimposes any given formal rule.

In human cultures, the subject of integration arises insofar as it defines the degree in which the *variable* is accommodated, or not, within the general structure of a society. Political and social systems live from this intermediate space, this threshold between personal empiricism and social agreement. In this context, the degree of integration of personal identities and characters (in which *taste* also plays a role) is an important aspect in the depiction of a given society and its political features. This is also the reason why the construction of a sense of variable taste is such a fundamental aspect of consumerist economies, in which a pursuit to grasp individuality is at the base of the system (Figure 9).

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19. Recall Adolf Loos' notion of "constant measure" which is, in other words, "(…) the consequence of a principle pursued methodically; (…) Style that is sought after is really nothing but *manner*. Manner becomes dated; style never does." Viollet-le-Duc, *op. cit.*, 256. These architects expressed in their own epochs the line of thought according to which forms are an inescapable material result of a given culture and that "manner" (or "formalism" in other words) corrupts this logic.
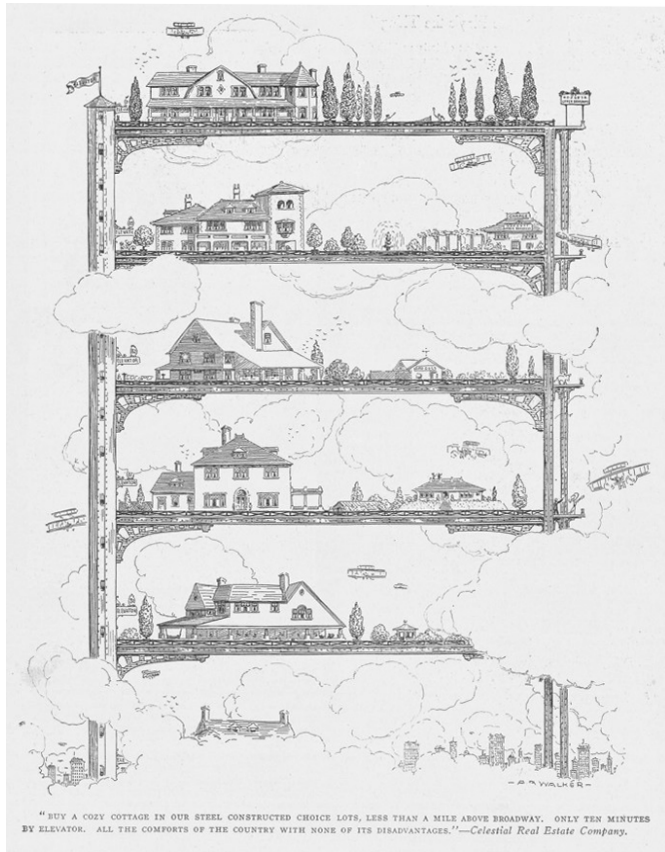
Figure 9. *"1909 Theorem: The Skyscraper as Utopian Device for the Production of Unlimited Numbers of Virgin Sites on a Single Metropolitan Location"*
Source: Koolhaas, R. Delirious New York, A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan.

In design, this articulation between exception and rule is a question whose answers can be grouped in two main types. The first design option can be synthesised by the establishment of a common *neutral* terrain seen as sufficiently broad as to allow for the flourishing of individual expression.[20] On the one hand, this approach is coherent with a sort of carthesian process of thinking which sets a correspondence between *abstract neutral form* and *abstract neutral Man*. On the other, this process may also foresee and enable a linear sequence between the neutral general form and eventual specific appropriations that may happen in that general structure. These two characteristics contribute to the sense that such an approach is open and adaptable and, therefore, they also contribute to its widespread conceptual and physical applicability.[21]

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20. In general terms, the first stage of this approach (the idea of neutrality) derives from the European Enlightenment Period, when the pursuit of "(…) an impersonal, generalised and abstract form (…) devoid of individualistic feeling and which overtakes personal emotion (…)" was systematised. Rossi, "Para una arquitectura de tendencia" In *Escritos: 1956 – 1972*, 1977, 124.

21. Read Žižek's words on the concept of universality, as interpreted by Sead Zimeri: "(…) universality is the terrain which generates its own problems and then presents itself as the appropriate solution." (Zimeri, "Slavoj Žižek on the dialetic of universal and particular", 2010). The notion of a neutral form provides, then, an understandably practical foundation for large-scale repetitive production of objects.

The second approach meets, by contrast, a certain aesthetic of spontaneity. This approach is particularly visible in most contemporary urban and landscape planning, in which the rigidity of the repetitive, monochord, bureaucratic city is increasingly combated.[22] Typological differentiation, variability of volume, and the proposal of diverse relationships with the landscape attempt to integrate different types of people and to reject monothematic, monocultural and monoformal spaces. Alternatively, current landscape planning tends to follow the model of an aesthetic of informality inherited from the Picturesque movement, arguably as a means of conveying a sense of leisure and diversity. In short, such a design approach contests the idea of anodyne *neutral* space and, alternatively, it proposes the notions of specificity or particularity as soothing solutions for the fear of uniformity and unrecognizability.

In the architecture of buildings, the suggestion of informality derived from this second, non-neutral approach is achieved, for example, by organising spaces and furniture in an *organic* way, by reducing linear paths to a minimum, by optimising the distances between accesses and maximising the spaces of *free circulation*. This helps to reduce the compartmentalisation of the fruition spaces and to limit the idea of "direct line from A to B" to a minimum. Furthermore, the suggestion of an *organic* image for the buildings (either by avoiding regular geometric shapes or by the selection of the building materials) reinforces this sense of particularity and, correspondingly, of informality.[23]

Colin Rowe reflected on this cyclical fluctuation between the establishment of general laws and the fascination with exceptionality, stating that:

> "(…) the requirement of a manifest character as a requisite of any good architecture was the main agent of dissolving the hierarchy of values to which the academic system had been restricted. The academic tradition [at the beginning of the 19th century] was concerned with the ideal and with its physical translation as a visual norm (…); 'All the beauty and grandeur of art consists in being able to rise above all singular forms, local customs, particularities and details of any type', says Sir Joshua Reynolds (…); but now [in the Romantic and Picturesque movement] precisely these 'singular forms' (...) these exceptions and accidents (...) are the ones that become full of interest and «character»; and perhaps this discovery is the most complete way of representing the Romantic revolution. 'Only the perfectly characteristic deserves to

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22. This statement applies mainly to "consolidated" settlements in the European context, for example, and perhaps not quite to the gigantic urban expansions in Asia or Africa. Some differences between these cases will be further interpreted in this article.

23. The influence of Picturesque theory is reflected on our contemporary visual culture, as summarised by John Macarthur: "(…) It is not, in fact, difficult to make a caricature of picturesque buildings. (…) They should avoid continuous wall areas, and the edges of space should be layered, framed and often open at the corners (…). Some parts being dominant and others subsidiary, there should be a sense of directionality of the building facing the landscape. (…) Picturesque buildings should (…) extend in one main direction, preferably across the topography, to emphasize the rise and fall of the land. (...) Visible roofs are good in picturesque because their intersection and overlap with walls makes for variety. (…) In fact, I think that much of picturesque architecture from 1800 to the present is simply the caricatured application of such a formula (…). " Macarthur, op.cit., 155-156.

be called beautiful', Goethe had written. 'Without character there is no beauty', and character becomes one of the most familiar and repeated motifs of the new era."[24]

Another important aspect in this discussion about the degree of exceptionality of the design proposals relates to typology. Assuming that spatial planning translates a correspondence with the environmental, cultural and social conditions of a given setting, then one of its fundamental elements is the *cell*, that is, its basic unit. The term *cell*, here, does not have a material connotation (in other words, it is not a physical element such as a shape or a building material), but it is meant as a social component of planning on which every subsequent design decision is founded. For example, in the design of housing units (a basic and common type of building, which consumes a large proportion of land and other resources), many design options derive from an interpretation of who the inhabitant is. Questions like "How many people is a given unit likely to house?", "How old are the inhabitants?", "Which daily activities are relevant for this group?" are a fundamental part of the project and they influence the large typological schemes and their small subtleties. The answer to such questions provides quantitative data but also qualitative details that can be decisive for the planners' proposal.

Figure 10. *Lacol. La Borda Cooperative Housing, Barcelona*
Source: Institut Municipal de l'Habitatge i Rehabilitació de Barcelona.

In Europe one can identify significant changes through the ages with regard to the definition of social cell (and that of typological cell, correspondingly). The

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24. Rowe, Slutsky, "Carácter y composición, o algunas vicisitudes del vocabulario arquitectónico del siglo XIX" In *Manierismo y arquitectura moderna y otros ensayos*, 1999, 70 (the passages that the author quotes originate from Reynolds, *Literary Works, Vol. II*, 1770, and Goethe., *Von Deutscher Baukunst*, 1773).

main shifts occurred, arguably, with the development of bourgeois societies and with the progressive reinforcement of modern individuality from the Renaissance and particularly from the Enlightenment onwards (albeit with irregular fluctuations), in contrast with the community-based Medieval feudal mentality.[25] For instance, the aforementioned concept of "living room" derives from these developments, as well as other typological variations which developed accordingly.

Many contemporary proposals also try to reflect the balance between individual and communal aspirations, pondering on which elements are *neutral*, *particular* or *collective*, and also on the meaning of terms like *family* or *living community* (Figure 10). The interpretation of such concepts is, thereafter, reflected on the sense of informality suggested by the environments, in coherence with the tendential informality of many contemporary societies.[26]

For example, one can identify a tendency to re-interpret the possible advantages of communal spaces over isolated individual units. This tendency has practical motivations, on the one hand, but it also expresses the social and identity issues concerning many contemporary societies, especially in the European context. The practical motivations are essentially economy-related. In fact, it is spatially and economically more efficient to build a centralised or shared space that houses certain communal activities (such as laundries or, in some cases, kitchens[27]) than to build several smaller spaces for each individual housing unit. At a social level, these options also reveal a desire to combine a sense of individuality with the idea of returning to a sort of shared or public living experience.

Words

In general terms, the border between isolated individual actions and integrated collective endeavours is hard to clarify. In spatial planning in particular, one perceives that the bigger the size of the object, the hazier this border becomes, as the factors which influence the results are more numerous and more complex.

Going back to the idea of *spontaneous*, one can add that, besides being somewhat synonymous to "unpredicted", this term has a second connotation. *Spontaneous building* is usually also understood as an utilitarian response, a direct expression of constructive pragmatism used to solve everyday problems. In the case of human settlements, namely in large or dense territories, the consequence of this spontaneous building is often defined as *informal*. At this point, it is important to pursue clarity and precision in the words, in order to test this correspondence.

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25. Regarding the transition from the feudal to the modern notion of individual space read Leite, *op.cit.* 217-221.

26. The statement that there is a tendency of increasing informality in contemporary societies is admittedly disputable. Its validity and limits will be further approached in the chapter "Discussion".

27. In this regard, see for example Anna Puigjaner's work on the topic of "kitchenless house" and "kitchenless city". Puigjaner, *Kitchenless City*, 2018.

What do we mean when we label a building or space as *informal*? What do we mean by *formal* and *informal city*, or by "urban" and "rural"?[28]

The definition of *urban settlement*, for instance, is not universal. The criteria that lead up to this definition are sometimes unclearly established and can change depending on context. For example, one sees that a *city* cannot simply be defined by the number of inhabitants (either in absolute amount or in proportion with other local factors), as shown below (Table 1 and Figure 11).

Table 1. "*National Definitions of 'Urban Area' as Used for a Custom Selection of Countries*"

National definitions of 'urban area' as used for a custom selection of countries[5]

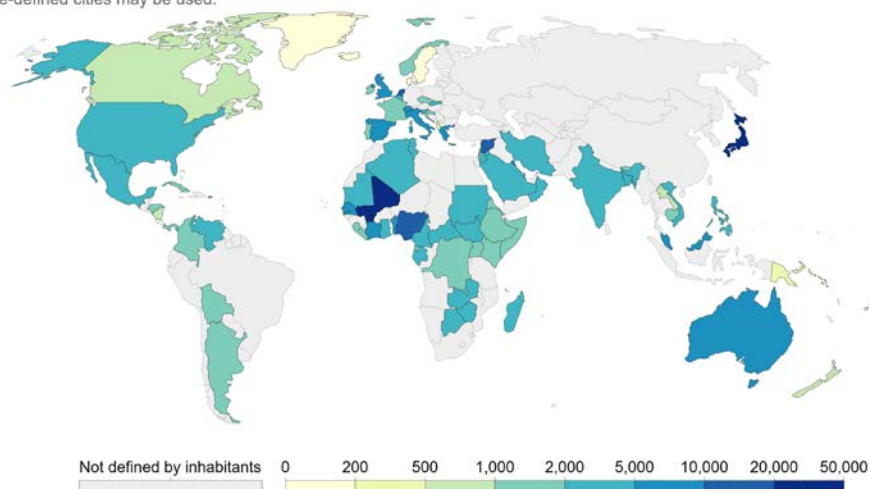| Country	National definition of 'urban'
Argentina	Localities with 2,000 inhabitants or more.
Sweden	Built-up areas with 200 inhabitants or more and where houses are at most 200 metres apart.
Japan	Cities defined as shi. In general, shi refers to a municipality that satisfies the following conditions: (1) 50,000 inhabitants or more; (2) 60 per cent or more of the houses located in the main built-up areas; (3) 60 per cent or more of the population (including their dependents) engaged in manufacturing, trade or other urban type of business.
India	Statutory places with a municipality, corporation, cantonment board or notified town area committee and places satisfying all of the following three criteria: (1) 5,000 inhabitants or more; (2) at least 75 per cent of male working population engaged in non-agricultural pursuits; and (3) at least 400 inhabitants per square kilometre.
Zimbabwe	Places officially designated as urban, as well as places with 2,500 inhabitants or more whose population resides in a compact settlement pattern and where more than 50 per cent of the employed persons are engaged in non-agricultural occupations.
Singapore	Entire population.
Uruguay	Cities officially designated as such.

Source: Our World in Data.

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28. On this topic, read the following argument by Jörg Schröder, where the author argues for a layered paradigm of urban-rural polarities: "(…). Many people in Europe are defining 'rural' as their living places, with cultural, social, and economic links to different poles, and modified 'urban' parts of their life-styles; the diversification of notions of 'urban' is to be seen as parallel to shifts in 'rural'. Even abstract indicator-models hint at these ongoing shifts: according to the new urban-rural typologisation of EU (Dijkstra and Poelman 2014), 40% of the population is living in densely populated areas (cities), 29% in thinly populated areas (rural areas) and 31% in intermediate density areas. (…) 'Urban' and 'rural' as important categories of policies (…) need renewed operability especially for areas outside of dense cities; geographic definitions of demographics (population density) or of functional criteria (mobility, or services) are not operative. (….)" Schröder et al., "An actualised urban-rural paradigm of cooperation." in *Territories: Rural-Urban Strategies*, 2017, 24-25.

Figure 11. *"Minimum Number of Inhabitants for a Settlement to Classify as Urban Area"*
Source: Our World in Data.

Words like *spontaneous* or *informal* are also relevant in this context. In the definition of *urban* settlement, how much do those terms weigh and what do they mean?

If one expects that informal buildings or spaces display a certain type of look or materiality, then the classification is mostly aesthetic, rather than symbolic. If one equates spontaneous and informal to *vernacular*, then this correspondence is social and, at times, geographical (if the traditional separation between urban and rural is assumed). If one defines informal as something which was not designed by an *official* planner (architect, designer, urbanist), then most of the buildings built by Humanity throughout History are not formal and, if so, most of our settlements (even those which are already "assimilated" by our cultures through the passage of time and experience, to paraphrase Rogers) are fundamentally informal.

This last hypothesis is particularly comprehensive. In the case of traditional or permanent settlements such as cities (let us ignore for now this term`s aforementioned disputability and accept it as a concise contrast to "ephemeral urbanism"[29] and temporary constructions such as those for seasonal happenings), the borders of what is commonly understood as the settled city are often being redefined, as well as the idea of centrality.

In practice, the so-called informal settlements are not necessarily *informal*, but rather *illegal* or at least not fully integrated within the traditionally accepted idea of consolidated city. In other words, these territories do not necessarily correspond to

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29. This expression is taken from the homonymous book by Mehrotra, Vera and Mayoral on this matter. Mehrotra, Vera, and Mayoral, *Ephemeral Urbanism: Does Permanence Matter?*, 2017.

the concept of informality as a relaxation of behavioural rule, as they often represent or define behavioural rule themselves. Likewise, they do not correspond to the notion of informality as the creation of unassimilated random shapes, as these territories often possess repeated features which result in a sort of unspoken formal canon (sometimes as a long-term inescapable consequence of initially *spontaneous* construction, and sometimes as a result of coordinated planning). So the term *informal* shows mostly a political connotation, as it is used to swiftly communicate differences in social status between areas of a territory. This is, in fact, a way to reinforce the demarcation between those territories, rather than a contribution to understand them as dialogical elements, as integrated parts of each other.

However, contemporary architecture and territorial planning does attempt to comprehend these connections between the conventionally named *formal* and *informal* cities. For instance, the commonly accepted idea of "Masterplan" is currently being replaced by alternative bottom-up planning ideals such as community-driven design (Figures 12 and 13) or the concept of "Cityforming" (Table 2).

Figures 12 and 13. *Munich: The City as Living Room. Interventions in the Streets by the Collective "Die Städtischen"*
Photography: Paulo Guerreiro.

Table 2. *"Cityforming © vs. Masterplan. Source M. Carta". Transcription by the Author from the Original Text (Figure 5, page. 52)*

CITYFORMING	MASTERPLAN
is incremental	is instantaneous
is open	is closed
plans by steps	acts by steps
is strategic	is regulative
is dialogic	is assertive
is adaptive	is conformative
enables urban tactics	defines land uses
activates scenarios	anticipates scenarios
produces new metabolism	acts by separate layers
generates resources	consumes resources
acts by programs	acts by projects
generates community	settles populations

Source: Schröder et al. *Territories – Rural-Urban strategies*, 2017.

These are planning tools which, in principle, are usable in different contexts and scales, as they stem from the basic idea that formal and informal spaces are increasingly indissociable.[30] The language that is used to define "Cityforming" is also revealing of its underlying mentality. For example, the contrast established between a plan which "*enables* urban tactics" and one that "*defines* land uses" quite clearly expresses an attitude through which the mantra of collaborative, dialogical communities is disciplined within the analytical framework of planning.[31]

Depending on the scale and scope of the desired interventions, these theoretical principles are more or less applicable, insofar as they are more or less altered by the factors of their political and economic context.

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30. The so-called slums "(…) include both formal settlements in a process of becoming informalized and informal settlements becoming formalized." (Dovey et al., "Towards a morphogenesis of informal settlements" in *Habitat International*., no. 104, 2020). The present text argues that the same can also be said about other contexts and that this idea, in general, defines contemporary human-built territories.

31. "There is the argument that "the essence of the 21st-century urban utopia is the building of diverse urban communities, not through large global offices by architects and financial companies that are pro-green-growth, but by means of citizens". (Petrella, "Why recitizenise the city?" In *Domus Green*, Sep. 2016, 10). Although the second part of the passage (the "means") is perhaps questionable, the idea of acknowledgement or creation of diverse urban communities as an increasingly present goal in urban planning seems to be quite accurate.

Replica

If formal and informal spaces are increasingly indissociable, does that also mean that they are indistinguishable?

Our embedded way of thinking as contemporary planners is, arguably, based on the following sequence: if spontaneous building is a practical attitude, this means that it leads to a visible formal manifestation. This formal result, if interpreted isolatedly (that is, if one were to analyse only one individual building, for example) could communicate a sense of individual expression.[32] But, if one adds up various examples of spontaneous manifestations, then a sort of shared expression becomes, in theory, intelligible. And, if it is intelligible, it is replicable.

Such a process of thinking, based on sampling and subsequent replication, is characteristic of post-modern architectural theory, summarised by the seminal words of Robert Venturi.[33] In accordance with this line of thought, contemporary spatial planning attempts to reproduce the associations with informality, imitating the formal characteristics which lead to those associations (the notion of relaxed individual expression and the sense of lifestyle diversity, for example, are common expectations in many societies).

For example, take the experimental project for an urban ensemble in Paraisópolis, Brazil, by Christian Kerez's architecture office (Figures 14 and 15). Read the following passage about it:

> "This project offers the people living in this new settlement the same life as in a favela. Each house has a direct access to the alleys and small squares. In front of each living room there is a veranda where people can dry their clothes and stay outside. On top of most houses there is a roof terrace. Five different housing units, each with a surface of 50 square meters are built ninety times. The arrangement of these vertical, standardised single family houses is totally irregular to define a labyrinthic, continuously changing space. This project acknowledges the favelas as a very specific form of architecture with totally different qualities, architectural and urbanistic, than any modernistic or contemporary western residential area."[34]

This project attempts to replicate some of the spatial features of the favela, in some way glamourising their picturesque exoticism, and tries to integrate them in the legitimisation of the design. A sort of programmed irregularity is proposed, emulating the signs of diversity from spontaneous building by using the traditional methods of disciplined urbanism and architecture: a structured analysis organised

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32. In order to simplify the argument, let us validate this basic premise that a merely "individual expression" is possible. The anthropological and sociological boundaries between innate, individual, acquired and cultural knowledge are indeed too complex and its nuances far exceed what this article and its author can grasp in the context of this article.

33. See Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, 1966.

34. "Christian Kerez - Social Housing in Paraisopolis", published on divisare.com. The authorship of the text is not clear. If the words come from the architectural office itself, than that corroborates the argument that the project intends to systematise or domesticate the variability which exists in the original favelas. If, on the other hand, these words translate an editorial interpretation by the publisher, than that reveals how this replica of spontaneity is accepted as a possible canon in architectural practice.

in parameters, the establishment of patterns and typological repetitions, the identification of functional, formal and expressive models and of their causes and effects.


Figures 14 and 15. *Christian Kerez, Project for Social Housing in Paraisópolis*
Source: divisare.com (© Christian Kerez).

The subject of replica is ever-present in architecture and in territorial planning, but it is particularly visible in big settlements, where a sense of large-scale repetition is more blatant or at least more likely to occur. In this case, two types of urban extension are particularly noteworthy.

Take the example of Luanda. This capital city concentrates a large proportion of Angola`s population and was subject to an exponential and often poorly regulated expansion. The 1950's and 1960's plans for the city which defined its

main infra-structures considered a population of circa 400,000 people,[35] a number which is far from the currently estimated 3.5 Million inhabitants,[36] and they did not conceive its current population density (Figure 16).
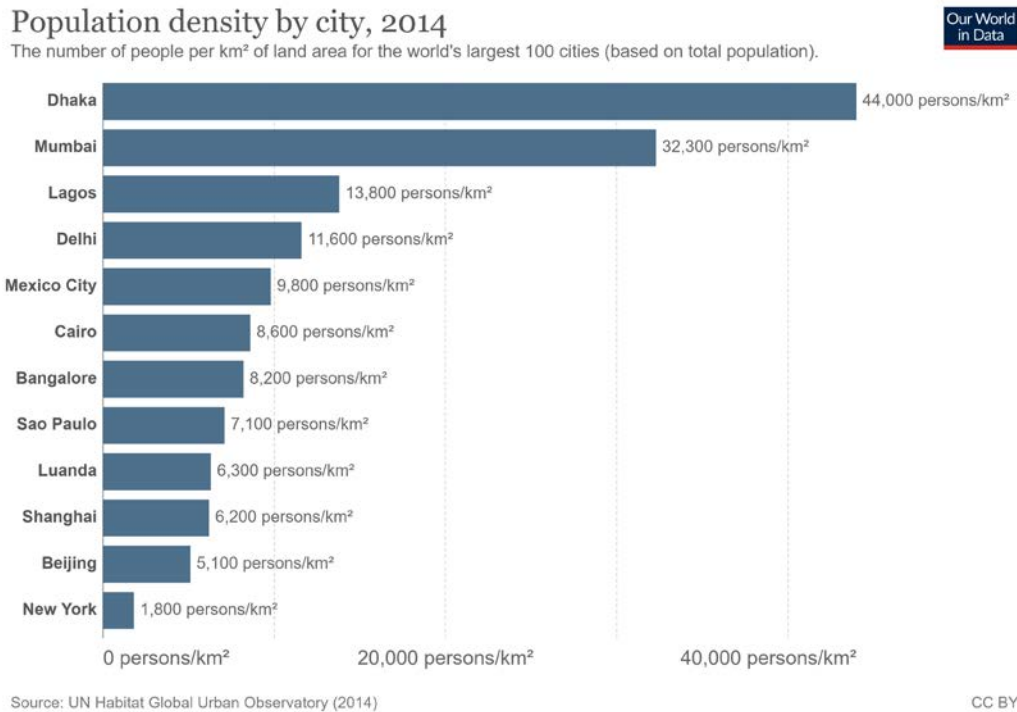
Figure 16. *"Population Density by City, 2014" (Luanda with ca. 6,300 Persons/ km²)*
Source: Our World in Data.

In this regard, Luanda is not a particularly exceptional example of urban exponential growth in recent decades, as it shares many issues with other cities in poor countries. Nevertheless, this city provides good examples to interpret the ideas of *informal settlement* and of *informality as a design goal*.

Luanda's expansion areas can be sorted in two main types. The first is the city's *musseques*, that is, its slums and derivatives (Figure 17). This type of construction can be divided into several sub-categories, which display different degrees of integration with the organisation of the *established* city, be it by the link to the general infrastructures, by their urban morphology, the epoch in which they were initially built, the existence or absence of a formal urban plan for those areas and the degree in which those plans and initial constructions were altered through time. This means that these territories are not uniform and that a general definition

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35. For an overview of the several urban plans devised for Luanda in those decades read Figueiredo, *Oito 48. 13 Treze. A Habitação Colectiva Como Substrato de Urbanização 1950 – 1970*, 2008.

36. Population considering Luanda´s "metropolitan area", according to the data provided by UCCLA (União das Cidades Capitais de Língua Portuguesa, "Union of the Capital Cities of Portuguese Language") www.uccla.pt/membro/luanda.

that encompasses all of their nuances is hard to achieve. Nonetheless, they do constitute a general type of territorial category, which is commonly seen as alien to the image and the perimeter of the idealised core traditional city.

Figure 17. *Luanda (Samba Municipality), 2020*
Source: Angola Image Bank.

The second type of expansion space is that of the so-called "new centralities" (Figure 18). This official designation defines large areas built mainly around the spaces occupied by the perimetral *musseques*. These further enlargements of the city are commissioned by the central political power and are almost exclusively built by large foreign companies and/or Nations (mostly China). The "new centralities" are meant to provide accommodation to the city's middle class and also to the population that previously lived in the slums, as well as the traditional neighbourhood equipments (infra-structure, green areas, schools, etc.), although many still remain as "Ghost Towns".

Figure 18. *Formal or Formalist? Luanda (Kilamba Kiaxi "New Centrality")*
Source: Moreira, P., 2012/Researchgate.net.

Both of these types of construction express a sense of replica and rapid multiplication, mostly due to the fact that they stem from the same root: urgency. They are, however, profoundly different, both in their morphological characteristics and, more importantly, in their organic integration in the cultural landscape of the city.

The commonly named *informal* additions to the city represent a bottom-up extension which replicates itself organically. This applies to different scales of intervention, from small additions to pre-existing plots or buildings (often initially illegal or unauthorised), to large territories such as the *musseques*, which are the long-term result of those spontaneous and pragmatic interventions. Such interventions do not arise from formal (that is, *official*) or erudite considerations, but primarily from basic need or sheer cultural habit.

For this reason, the border between formal and informal city is impossible to define. Materially, *informal* structures are often built as appendixes to officially planned buildings and they often share the same urban spaces, especially in threshold or peri-urban areas (Figures 19 and 20). Informal structures also frequently provide a way to directly express needs that the formal city does not satisfy, and unauthorised spontaneous building habitually displays subtleties that the formal limitations of the established city do not allow (the term "formal", here, is purposefully meant both in its behavioural and material senses). In other words, the possibility for personal customisation intrinsic to spontaneous building makes it an organic complement to the constraints of the *neutral city*, often conceived in order to respond primarily to the concerns of the funders, rather than to those of its specific inhabitants (the relationship between typology and the source of funding is quite explicit, in this regard).

Figure 19. *Luanda (Catambor and Prenda Municipalities), 2020*
Source: Angola Image Bank.

Figure 20. *Luanda, 2019*
Photography: Wilfred Figueiredo.

The design attitude exemplified by projects like the "new centralities", conversely, is based on a more literal notion of repetition in which a given building is simply multiplied on the allocated plot. The priority given to rapid construction influences every aspect of the proposal and contextual considerations are excluded from the process, with the exception of the purely technical ones. In this sense, these endeavours can be seen as quintessentially formal, as they take the idea of canon to the limit.

In principle, if one accepts the idea of *copy-paste* building and of tendentially neutral repetition as an unobstructed starting point for subsequent appropriations, then these projects can be seen as more flexible, in the long term, than the spontaneous bottom-up alternative, which is often hindered by the constraints of its specificity. Even if *neutrality* only becomes assimilated over time (in contrast with *spontaneity*, which is automatically and therefore inescapably assimilated), it can indeed provide a potentially lasting foundation for cultural incorporation.

If, on the contrary, one is fond of the idea that "assimilated" (and therefore non-formalist) entities are only those which were tested and accepted by a given culture over a long period of time, then these *copy-paste* contextless projects represent the ultimate formalist threat.

Discussion

The current text has presented three main areas of discussion, exploring possible meanings of the term *informal* applied to spatial planning.

The first element of debate is the idea that contemporary (democratic) societies show a tendency for increasing informality. Admittedly, one can argue that certain signs may point in the opposite direction, particularly at a macro-scale. If one considers matters such as discourse intolerance (which can be seen as an obedience to discursive canon, and therefore as a sign of rigid formality) or social and economic inequality (and the sense of stratification that it entails), then the argument that formality still dominates social relations is indeed reasonable. Additionally, socio-economic class may still determine to which degree certain aspects of informal building are deemed acceptable and how permanently integrated in daily life they are. The concept of *co-living* and the notion of shared communal space as in Lacol's La Borda project, for example, are perhaps still connoted and delimited to certain social groups, which in turn influences how the building market reacts to such design approaches.

Oppositely, certain arguments may lead to the conclusion that a sense of informality is increasing. The idea of *leisure time* is disseminated as a right for large parts of the population, particularly in prosperous contexts where the relationship between working hours and free time is being redefined. The apparent dilution of vertical hierarchies and their replacement with horizontal structures in the workplace and also in other environments is a sign of an increasing sense of relaxation of social rigidness. The possibility of personal customisation in various aspects of life has established itself as a given (something which is closely, but not exclusively, related to consumer culture).

The present argument implies that this second type of factors currently weighs more in the definition of architectural and urban form than those which bend towards obedience to rigid behavioural rules. Furthermore, it is suggested that this link between social informality and spatial planning induces visible changes in aspects like typology and aesthetic affiliations.

The second area of discussion is the questioning of expressions such as *informal building* or *informal settlements*, especially when applied to large urban expansions. The argument here is that, if the original motivations for such type of building are practical and urgent to the point where they constitute the organic rule of a given context, then they are no longer informal, but rather the *de facto* norm. These territories can be reconsidered by not focusing strictly on their physical characteristics, but rather by understanding that they reflect behavioural rules which can be useful to comprehend spatial planning in a broader sense. The proposition of the argument is that interpreting the general concept of informality is a more valuable starting tool for design thinking than the attempts to understand the individual physical elements that compose those *informal spaces*.

The third aspect is connected to the previous one: the idea that *formal* architecture attempts to replicate the physical features of irregular, unplanned building. However, planning may scientifically produce an environment that tries to trigger spontaneous behaviours (in the lack of a better term), but the structure

and the tools of planning mean that systematised architectural planning is fundamentally the antonym of spontaneity. The essential critique on strictly analytical interpretations of the so-called spontaneous or informal buildings is, here, that such line of action focuses on the results, rather than on the original conditions which led to those results. Spontaneity is not replicable and a simulation of spontaneity is a frivolous exercise if the motivation, process and results of spontaneous building are mistaken as being the same as those of simulated spontaneity.[37] This is especially so if the results are judged mostly by aesthetic similarity.

Conclusions

The argument explores two main dimensions of the concept of informality. The first is that it broadly represents a deviation from canon and that this applies to behaviours as well as to architecture. The second aspect is the idea that contemporary spatial planners often imply connotations of informality in their projects for place-making. This is an inheritance of the permanent fluctuations between the pursuit of classical, *universal* designs, on the one hand, and custom-made, *specific* proposals, on the other.[38] The quest for specificity is coherent with a social and economic system where the discourse is heavily marked by the repetition of terms like "community", "cooperation", "interaction" or "dialogue".[39]

Contemporary spatial planning attempts, then, to reproduce the physical characteristics which lead to associations with *informality* and to distance itself from indicators of rigidity, of repetition or sameness. The goal of such a process is, arguably, that of systematising spontaneity and, ultimately, of integrating the several meanings of informality within the formal canons of design. However, although the results can aesthetically be seen as analogous, these are met by means which are diametrically opposed to the attitude which is supposedly being replicated. By establishing new sets of rules that can potentially be replicated, planners demonstrate a fundamentally formal attitude.

This happens for two main reasons. The first one is a sort of embedded professional habit, an irresistible tendency to categorise and systematise elements

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37. The term "spontaneous building" is mentioned in this sentence in its traditional meaning, which can be summarised by the ideas of "architecture without architects" and the common usage of the expression "informal settlement" (which is disputed by this article). The expression "simulated spontaneity" is proposed here in the sense of "replica through scientific methods" explored in the beginning of the previous chapter.

38. The contemporary political and economical take on the traditional concept of *genius loci* (in most European contexts, at least) can perhaps be synthesised by the following words: "Globalisation has made localities and their interaction more important for economic growth and prosperity. Space is becoming increasingly 'slippery', in the sense that capital, goods, people, and ideas travel more easily, but, at the same time, increasingly 'sticky' and 'thick' because capital, goods, people, and ideas, despite being constantly on the move, tend to remain stuck in agglomerations. Consequently, development strategies should not be space-neutral, but, placed-based and highly contingent on context." Schröder et al., *op. cit.,* 2017, 20-22.

39. Refer back to the concept of "Cityforming", for example, for a clear translation of this idea.

in order to re-apply them. The second is the fact that such an approach is the only viable solution for applying the interest in informality in the context of professional planning offices. As a planless or projectless architecture is, for the most part, inconceivable in structured relations between planner and client, the only justifiable way is to discipline informality until it becomes formalised. This requires a structure that contradicts, as mentioned, what informality originally implies.

The subject of formality is essentially cultural and it is applicable regardless of epoch and topic. The present article reinforces the argument of formality, more so than formalism, as an operative criterion and as a fundamental architectural feature.

Acknowledgments

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