The Interpretation of the Informal City

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1.   Metabolism and Heterotopias

In the process of urban transformation, the possibility that exceptions to official policies can become as valid as the rules themselves, in the case of spontaneous settlements, provide a plausibile interpretation for the understanding of the informal city.

During the 12th International Biennale Architecture Exhibition in Venice (2010), in the Japanese Pavilion, it was apparent how the Metabolism concept, adopted by many architects in the Sixties, could still be considered relevant for the cities of today. A example of Tokyo's residential urban landscape (*The Metabolizing City*) was depicted in a video showing its transformation over time, as if it was a living organism. This phenomenon, seen in a zenith view, and emphasized with the acceleration induced by a morphing effect process, showed how Tokyo's chaotic landscape does «repeatedly undergoes metabolism based on the inherent, 26-year 'life cycle' of Japanease houses» and this is «defined by a combination of houses from several generations»[1].

The Metabolism of the Sixties was focused on a mechanical concept for the City that, like a machine, can be metabolized by changing its basic components. Actually, in contemporary Japanese cities, this concept seems to be replaced with a sort of "Void Metabolism", by virtue of the rights conferred to the land's owners – as long as they obey the regulations – to built freely any type of structure they want, even with a heavy series of adaptative restructuring, while retaining the open spaces (the voids).

The outcome of a Japanese city, complied on the basis of this rights guaranteed, appear very different from the cohesive and compact urban fabrics that make recognizable European cities. It is possible to distinguish in Tokyo a particular form of heterotopia, a space made by simultaneity, juxtaposition, dispersion and free coexistence that seems to confirm the idea of the 'anomalous fabric' formulated at the end of Sixties. "The heterotopy got the power to juxtapose, in a single real place, different spaces and different places that are incompatible from each other" like theater and cinema – as declaimed in the third principle of etherotopy formulated by Michel Foucault[2].

The issue of the juxtaposition that is applied to Japanese city does generate a really theatrical space, because it is 'putting up' actions and individualities (therefore realities) very different from each other. Instead in the urban sprawl created from spontaneous human activities widespread all over the world, we find that these informal areas are shaped

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[1] Y. Tsukamoto, "Escaping the Spiral of Intolerance: Fourth-Generation Houses and Void Metabolism", In K. Kitayama, Y. Tsukamoto, R. Nishizawa, *Tokyo Metabolizing,* (Tokyo: TotoPublishing, 2010), p. 29.
[2] M. Foucault, *Des espaces autres,* conference, march 1967. In *Eterotopia, Luoghi e non luoghi meropolitani,* (Milano: Millepiani, Mimesis, 1994), pp. 9-21.

by the claimi of many people about their right to live and to be able to recognize themselves on a stable house, and to play an active part in its configuration. It is about a urban reality generated by the pursuit of an utopia.

Heterotopias such as Brasilian *favelas*, South African *townships* and Colombian *viviendas informales* are realities dense of forms and solutions that could provide 'food' for thought useful to architecture, despite still being considered, by most people, something like "heterotopias of deviation", borrowing one more time from the case study formulated by Foucault – «places that the society organizes on its edges (…) rather reserved to single persons whose behaviour is deviant than the average or standard request»[3].

2.   The reasons for the informal

When we think of the city, the recurrent model is still the Modernist one, that of a rational organism, defined in its parts – a place where new buildings show an aptitude to abstraction, to an invisible order where the involvement of its inhabitants is closely linked to technological virtuosity, in the search of surprising and unexpected design solutions. This is still the model that most part of the designers aspire to and to which they would like to participate because they think it is able to ensure the free rein of creativity, large investments and maximum visibility of its directors and makers.

However, there is another city, a city that pre-designed templates. This kind of city responds to current needs, and the complex logics, that are the expression of local requirements rather than global structures. This is a city that is growing in parallel with the planned and structured policies, but at a dizzying rate, against which common planning and recovery tools cannot oppose much resistance. This part of the city, which pile up across the territory – whatever its topography and besieging the concentrations of trade and finance, mass tourism and luxury home –, remains largely unknown in its full extent, even if showing all the character evidence in the metropolitan concentrations of Central and South America, Africa and Asia. We could mention here Rio de Janeiro, Mexico City, Caracas and Bogotà as well as Johannesburg in South Africa and Mumbai in India.

The results ot these informal settlements appear similar to each other only superficially; in fact, even if they meet the primary need to give body to a habitable structure, they reflect different requirements corresponding to the different social structures and cultural heritages. Common expressions in these urban realities – unconsciously shared by people – are the extreme articulation and the life blood of the primary need of living (anything but elementar) and the desire to give form and expression to individuality, and the sense of belonging of the inhabitants to their homes and therefore also their identification with its formal results.

«If I were to describe my experience of Caracas with a single emotion – the psychologist Axel Capriles wrote – probably I should cite the dismay; the dismay in the broadest sense of the term, from the thrill facing the unexpected, the accident or the absurd, to fear or fascination of instability and change. The *genius loci* of Caracas feeds a particular appetite even if irregular and itermittent: it summons up the bizarre. The signs of metropolitan development follow the silent commands from the *barrios* and even the local city planners' jargon reflects the informality of the place: the collective soul of the people is imbued with a rebuff of the rules and with a strong avversion to law enforcement (…)»[4].

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[3] M. Foucault, *cit.* in *Utopie Eterotopie* (Napoli: Cronopio, 2006), p. 16.
[4] A. Capriles M., "Caracas. I piaceri e le sventure dell'informalità". In *Città. Architettura e società*, Catalogo della 10th Mostra Internazionale di Architettura di Venezia (Venezia: Marsilio, 2006), p. 107.

These observations, directed to the Venezuelan reality, could perfectly fit in the impressions that lead to the Brazilian *favelas*, or even to the huge urban tissue of colombian *viviendas informales* in Bogotà. In all these realities, when the initial dismay has been overcome and the architect-anthropologist has trained his eye to recognize recurring differences and constants, we can verify that those spontaneous built-up areas are not the result of a mere refusal of conventional norms, or the product of a lack of observance of laws. They are, instead, as has been revealed in the analyses of chaotic phenomena, the manifestation of 'a higher order' which is waiting to be fully understood.

«If, by definition, the formal systems are a set of explicit rules developed to regulate social life and to foresee its development, informality is then a levelling system that provides for the introduction of chaos into order, an adaptative attitude that accepts the lack of foresight, the surprise and randomness as inevitable and important element of life»[5]. Looking then to the houses of districts such as Bosa in Bogotà, it is possible to recognize in the use of colour and geometric motifs on the façades, not a mere decoration, but a language that communicates the role of each citizen in the community and, through changes over time, even its possible economic and social empowement. The same goes for the metal security fences that characterize the street fronts of the houses whose complexity goes hand in hand with the social achievement of its owners.

It is a question of decoding a complex language that comes from a social structure based on a balance that new architecture should respect, instead of imposing its presence to the masses, replacing the informality of the settlements. When buildings are thought only in terms of quantity and numbers, and without an understanding of the social impact that the lack of urban space and a typology of standardized serial-house can have on the community, the risk is to generate waste and violence. In this case the subsequent task of recovery and adaptation of those new buildings may become even more complex than the regeneration of informal urban tissue.

Significant in this regard is Lucien Kroll's point of view against the outcome of the modern residential ideology, made up of totally planned areas with prefabricated houses, which have had a devastating impact on European populations – only in Eastern Europe, 170 million people are forced to live in 70.000.000 prefabricated housing units now obsolete. According to Kroll, because the demolition work on these houses is "impossible, outrageous, inhumane and desperate", and the transformation is not feasible because it requires too long, a possible strategy is the reappropriation of the existing through successive additions, until the old structure is "covered up" and then allowed to re-grow over the years. This strategy would reaffirm the state again contemporary popular culture, shared by a multicultural adaptative majority[6].

3.   Some experiences

It is said that Christopher Alexander wanted to live for two weeks in a *barriada* of Lima, before tackling the project of his proposal for the PREVI consultation, the *Proyecto Experimental de Vivienda* promoted in 1965 by the Peruvian president Fernando Belaunde Terry. PREVI can be considered the most interesting and avantgarde experiment for an alternative social construction of a 'managed' district, which could povide an answer to the *barriadas* generated from the unstoppable urban immigration phenomenon that in the mid-sixties already was having the upper hand over the 'planned city'. Thirteen international architects (among them James Stirling, Charles Correa, Georges Candilis, the Japanese

[5] Ibidem, p. 108.
[6] See the Lucien Kroll project for the refurbishing of Hellersdorf, Berlin (1994).
Cfr. L. Kroll, L. Cavallari, *Ecologie urbane* (Milano: Franco Angeli, 2001); L. Kroll, *Tout est paysage* (Paris: Sens et Tonka, 2001).

group of Metabolists, Aldo van Eyck, Knud Svenssons) and as many Peruvians architects were involved in the development of prototypes for urban homes able to incorporate within themselves all future transformation and adaptation: each single unit had to contemplate the possibilità of its growing. The neighborhood, partially built in 1974 represent – albeit forgotten by official history of architecture – a forerunner of current trends within "social housing" policies targeted to territories of urban emergency.

An important example of architecture as social action is supported in South Africa by Carin Smuts; it is her conviction that "we must give people an environment where they can be proud of, with funtions and forms to match their aspirations". Developing a collaborative strategy directly with the population, Carin Smuts has carrried out projects of social relevance involving people as stakeholders and ensuring that they were also working with active participation on the site. Using poor local materials such as brick and corrugated sheet-iron – which were locally available, including reuse – and involving the local community in the colorful decoration that distinguishes South Africa popular culture, Carin Smuts has built low cost houses and many public facilities (schools, art centers, multipurpose rooms, rural centers for meetings) in the poor context of *townships.*

A similar attitude also characterized, in South Africa, the work of Peter Rich, while some experiences by Noero Wolf and 26'10 South Architects offices are focused on adaptative architecture that can be converted over time. The Pelip Housing project in Port Elizabeth designed by Noero Wolf Architects is oriented to the typical characters of spontaneous architecture. They also worked on basic habitable modules that can be integrated over time by the residents in the Motherwell housing scheme.

Starting with a careful study of the microeconomics that usual governs the survival of the poorest, in a proposal for the Diepsot Reception Area (the largest "apartheid township" of South Africa located between Johannesburg and Pretoria), 26'10 South Architects thought that the characters of informal buildings can change the standard of professional spaces associated with urban living and reveal new strategies to create a communal space by means of basic attributes that can contribute to the economical survival of the community. With the development of two different types of settlement, with particular attention to the urban dimension, the designers have been able to provide two different approaches that can ensure a possible growing over time and a plurality of of different possible uses and economies.

With similar attention, in a different context such as Chile, the architecture office Elemental, with their leader Alejandro Aravena, have developed residential seattlements such as Quinta Monroy in Inique and Lo Espejo in Santiago del Cile. These are attempts that seek to reconcile at the point of planning an appropriate availability of guaranteed standards (technological equipment and minimum living spaces) and the possibility of expansion of the residential cell over time that, in its fulfilment, utilises self-construction as a fundamental experience of appropriation and individual expression by each family unit.

To the experiences briefly described, we have to add others, like those of Teddy Cruz, on the border between San Diego and Tijuana[7] – that "studies conflict as the main operational instrument to redefine the architectural practice in the contemporary city" –, or the well known projects by Rural Studio in Alabama and by Jorge Jauregui in Rio de Janeiro *favelas'* contexts. A comprehensive investigation of how architects operate in areas of social conflict and of all the alternative solutions to build affordable social housing when dealing with the informal city has not been undertaken yet,

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[7] See J. Beardsley, "Border Crossings: Tijuana/San Diego" In «Harvard Design Magazine» no28, 2008.

as much as there is not a know outcome of what have been accomplished by the various architectural experiences over time.

What is missing, in fact, is a network connecting the performers of social architecture all over the world and an exchange of ideas about the experiences gained so far. If we add to this that reconciliation with the places of living should also necessarily consider a rethinking of urban space, studying carefully at how the informal city is used and what it requires, could provide an understanding on how important episodic experiences are on behalf of a reformulation of the idea of the city as a whole.

The answers lie in the wealth of suggestions and the dynamics of the informal city – as some acute interpreters of modern and contemporary architecture have already guessed. The solutions are in the eyes of those who coached the gaze to recognize them.

4.   Small utopias in big realities

Even though Michel Foucalt did not think to informal city when he wrote about heterotopias, some of his comments seem to fit particularly well with the expressions of 'spontaneous' architecture; «it is very likely – Foucault wrote – that every human group, whatever it is, carves out utopian places in the space it occupying, in which it really lives (…). We don't live in a black and white neutral space, we don't live (…) in the rectangle of a paper sheet. We live, die and love in a squared space, cutted, variegated, with bright and dark areas, with drops, steps, depressions and bumps, with some hard regions and other crumbly, permeable, porous»[8]. Looking at quarters like Bosa in Bogotà you can not help but notice an articulation of the built that, although certainly does not correspond to the model of an ideal society, it does take the shape of it for the mere fact of being an architecture, a system provided with a "carapace" designed by its own inhabitants, based on shared conventions.

Those are small utopias pursued by individuals, microcosms apparently ephemeral but able to assume the dimensions of a metropolis. The single Bosa residential units are self-generated and develop like living organisms in a manner that seems to respond to the 'cellular automata' of John Horton Conway's *Game of Life* (1970).

On the grid of Conway, like in the Bosa chessboard, despite the simplicity of the laws governing the game, apparently simple patterns may give rise to a veritable explosion of life forms in highly complex configurations or rather, to make interesting this kind of mechanisms is the fact that, despite their basic 'physics' is simple, their 'chemistry' can be very complicated[9].

Following an elementary principle of cause and effect, the Bosa inhabitants articulate and transform their house favoring the development of their social position and comunicate their status to the community in a clear way, through formal and chromatic codes that replicate their impact on the urban dimension. Each living cell, in fact, can grow in height or recast with an adjacent, may change or die – as like as the Conway cells – creating always new solutions and urban transformations that give answer to the spurs that comes so much by their own internal and from neighboring cells.

The opportunities of adaptation and the continuous opening of new perspectives that these realities shows, respond to a participatory process for the most part alien to the ideal that we wanted to forcibly impose to the very idea of the city;

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[8] M. Foucault, *Utopie eteotopie*, cit. p. 12.
[9] Cfr. S. Hawking and L. Mlodinow, *Il grande disegno*, (Milano: Mondadori, 2011); tit.orig. *The Grand Design*, 2011.
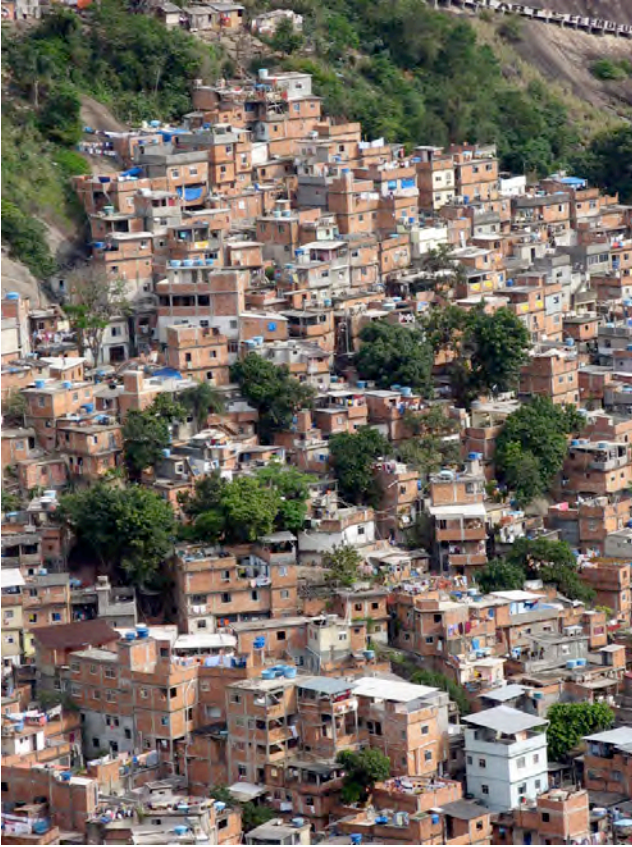
«the Modernism and Modern Architecture – as also noted Kisho Kurokawa – lack the intermediate spaces which, at one time, allowed chaotic elements that were coexistent and virtually inseparabile to complement one another»[10]

The slum of Dharavi (Mumbai, India)

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[10] K. Kurokawa, cit. in J. McGuirk, *"PREVI. The metabolist utopia"* In «Domus» no. 946, april 2011, p. 69.

Favelas in Rio de Janeiro, Brasil

Bosa (Bogotà, Colombia); photo: F. Quici

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Carin Smuts (CS Studio), Westbank Multi Pur pose Centre, Kuilsriver, Western Cape (2008)