Formalizing the Informal
New Urban Design Tactics in Latin America

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Abstract

This study identifies and analyzes how several contemporary Latin American architects have been developing urban interventions that radically depart from the conventions of modern architecture and planning. To this end, we have concentrated on tactical initiatives developed by Teddy Cruz on the San Diego-Tijuana border; Flavio Janches within the informal settlements located on the urban periphery of Buenos Aires; and Jorge Jáuregui in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro. Although the initiatives of these architects are mobilized in notably different national, cultural, socio-economic, and urban contexts within the United States, Mexico, Argentina, and Brazil, their projects collectively search for new approaches that respond to variant provocations— borderlands, liminalities, fractures—and thus, differentiate themselves from the norms of modern urbanism and conventional design practices.

Antecedents

Beginning in the second half of the 20th century, most Latin American countries experienced dramatic mass migrations of low-income people moving from rural areas to informal settlements situated at the metropolitan periphery. Developing spontaneously, these marginal urban configurations—or *favelas*—lacked infrastructure, health networks, public services, or urban planning strategies. Despite conditions of overcrowding and extreme poverty, the proximity of favelas to large cities allowed migrants greater access to work, education, security, health centers, and public transportation.

During the 1970s, many Latin American governments understood that the demographic and housing crisis in their burgeoning cities could be addressed by constructing social housing while eradicating informal settlements.[1] There was, however, a percolating awareness that such strategies would not succeed in stemming the flow of migration from rural to urban areas. Most, if not all, Latin American countries lacked the economic resources and political will to transform the physical conditions of inhabitants living in informal settlements. By the 1980s, the impact of migration to cities began to be reexamined within architectural and urban discourse, while the modernist dogmas of architecture and urban planning were increasingly questioned.[2] Much of the criticism centered on the failed social housing estates scattered across the region. Many contemporary architects and theorists concluded that the solution to urban informality did not lie in its eradication, but rather, in tactical remediation and design interventions that could improve the quality of life in these emergent communities.[3]

Stitching Borderlands:
Estudio Teddy Cruz + Fonna Forman

The most well-known architect in this group, Teddy Cruz, pursues research and

Figure 1. Estudio Teddy Cruz. Living Rooms at the Border. Study model.

professional work that focuses on the U.S.-Mexico border, particularly in the San Diego-Tijuana region. In his youth, Cruz emigrated from his native Guatemala to the southwestern United States where he studied architecture at California State University. His perspective, therefore, is that of an immigrant living in a country that is not his own—a condition that routinely informs his professional and personal development. Cruz's bicultural and bilingual understanding of the discipline suggests an architecture initially conceived in the Spanish language, but ultimately executed in English. Based on these antecedents, it is not surprising that his collaborative projects—since 2014 with Fonna Forman—have been characterized by hybridism, indeterminacy, fluidity, and transversality.

A key moment in Teddy Cruz's career was his participation in the 2010 *Small Scale, Big Change: New Architectures of Social Engagement* exhibition at the New York Museum of Modern Art.[4] Here, Cruz exhibited the *Casa Familiar* as an initiative promoted by an NGO focused on improving the quality of life of residents in the San Ysidro neighborhood of San Diego. More than a conventional architectural project, Casa Familiar (Fig 1) represents a participatory design process immersed in a continuous state of transformation. In this project, Cruz explores the fluid and changing notion of "home" in contemporary society: the same unit can serve young couples, single mothers with children, a space for those who work at home, or serve as a rentable space that generates income.

A distinctive feature of Casa Familiar is that the criticality of the proposal does not reside in its formal qualities, but rather, within ideas that frame the project through participation and fluidity. Rather than a static and definitive formal image, its emergence reflects a continuous process of transformations. Contrasting with the fundamental tenets of modern architecture, for Cruz, *form does not follow function*, but rather, architecture is understood as a flexible container housing multiple and variant uses that change over time. By freeing itself from obsessive formality, architecture

can be measured according to the intensity and quality of social exchanges.

For Cruz and Forman, architecture and design are agents of change. One of the issues that haunts them is the significance of the border wall separating Mexico from the United States—a symbolic provocation that has been politicized since the rise of Donald Trump. An example of this initiative is the *Manufactured Sites* project, where they propose "outbreaks" of informal settlements located at various points along the border. With Manufactured Sites, an urban design intervention intercepts the current political commentary. Expanding and challenging disciplinary boundaries, Cruz and Forman employ various representational formats—collages and diagrams—to narrate and disseminate their ideas.

For Cruz and Forman, the challenge of the US-Mexico border is considered both on a regional and global scale—illustrated in a collage with the image of a world map "split" in two and demarcated by the meridians 33º and 28º. Their division presents two hemispheres economically unbalanced by a thin red line. While the North connotes order, consumerism, and sprawl, the South is associated with disorder, density, and underdevelopment. The presence of the border highlights the symbolic and real separation of the international frontier. It confirms the presence of a veritable fracture which frames contrasting, yet adjacent, realities that Cruz insists must be actively resisted.

Repairing Fractures:
Flavio Janches and the Villas de Emergencia of Buenos Aires

Teddy Cruz and Fonna Forman develop their projects and theories in harmony with their teaching and research pursued within an academic framework. In a similar manner, Flavio Janches began his investigations of informal settlements within the academic framework of the Faculty of Architecture and

Figure 2. Flavio Janches. Villa Tranquila. Mural. Courtesy Flavio Janches

Urbanism (FADU) of the University of Buenos Aires where he serves as professor.

Driven by his research on urbanism and planning at FADU, in 2004 Janches, began to work in the informal settlement of Villa Tranquila, located in the district of Avellaneda. Like most Latin American cities, Buenos Aires was founded and developed according to the guidelines dictated by "The Laws of the Indies," an urban ordinance that explains why most Latin American cities have a checkerboard layout. Janches observes the deep contrast between the "formal" urban fabric of Buenos Aires, where the grid is an omnipresent device, and the chaotic informality of marginal settlements. This dichotomy reflects the feeling of much of Argentine society, in that those who inhabit the "villas de emergencia" (as they refer in Argentina to informal settlements) suffer the stigma of segregation and marginality, where the "villero" is assumed as a dangerous "other".

Attempting to bridge the immense "social distance" that separates people in the formal

Figure 3. Flavio Janches. Villa Tranquila, mini-soccer field. Courtesy Flavio Janches

Figure 4. Jorge Jáuregui. Fubá Campinho, aerial view. Courtesy Jorge Jáuregui.

and the informal cities, Janches and his team began by listening to the inhabitants of Villa Tranquila—attending to their demands, needs, and desires. After compiling their voices and interests, their next step was both tentative and modest: the making of a mural in one of the most challenged areas of the neighborhood.[5] Considering that two of the main stigmas of the village are violence and crime, the team's proposal contemplated the creation of a mural (Fig 2). Through making the mural, young members of the community had the opportunity to learn a trade, while visually expressing one of the most sensitive issues for its residents. The theme of the mural was agreed between members of the community—a memorial honoring those who lost their lives as a result of violence.

As a result of the collaborative process, the following steps pointed to interventions of greater formal and spatial impact: the creation of a children's playground, public plaza, and small soccer field (Fig 3). In all cases, most of the labor for the construction was provided by the residents. From this approach "urban acupuncture", the creation of new urban spaces confirms that minimal resources can yield positive and tangible results. Remarkable transformation of the physical conditions of the settlement can be achieved, allows residents the opportunity to get to know each other better, socialize, participate in sporting activities, and at the same time, foster a sense of pride and belonging.

In his essay entitled "Whose City is It?"[6] Flavio Janches reflects on his experiences developing interventions in informal settings. In the first instance, the question titled in the article may seem rhetorical—the obvious answer is that the city belongs to everyone. Although the physical and psychological division perseveres characteristics of Latin American metropolises, it can be synthesized as an opposition between the formal city and the informal city (reminiscent of that premonitory and tendentious sentence by Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, "Civilization or Barbarism").[7] It not only exposes two

contrasting and contrasting urban dispositions, but also synthesizes the barrier that separates two segments of the population of the same city who live opposite realities.

Leveraging Liminalities:
Jorge Jáuregui and the Favelas of Rio de Janeiro

If Teddy Cruz and Fonna Forman consider the border a critical way to understand the challenges of development and underdevelopment, and Flavio Janches assumes the urban project as a potential for healing a marginalized community, Jorge Mario Jáuregui postulates that the cracks are even more dramatic and pernicious when they act as dividing agents *within* Latin American cities. Jáuregui arrived in Brazil from his native Argentina in the early 1980s,[1] fleeing a sinister and violent dictatorship marked by its chilling toll of the disappeared. As he toured Rio de Janeiro with the gaze of the newcomer, Jáuregui recognized the remarkable contrast between a "cidade maravilhosa"[9] (marvelous city), amazingly photogenic and sensual, and the indecipherable favela-sheathed hills surrounding the formal urban core. For "Cariocas," as are usually referred to the inhabitants of Rio de Janeiro, the coexistence of two such contrasting urban conditions seemed "normal". For newcomer Jáuregui, however, the contrast illustrated a phenomenon rooted in profound historical and political injustices—derived from centuries of slavery—that had to be confronted and tactically remediated.

In Rio de Janeiro, the division that separates the "formal" traditional and wealthy city from the "informal" marginal and poor one is almost invisible, or rather, resides in characteristics of the urban fabric. On the one hand, the formal city, ordered and guided, is composed of streets, avenues, and squares; and on the other, the favela is marked by its informal, chaotic, and
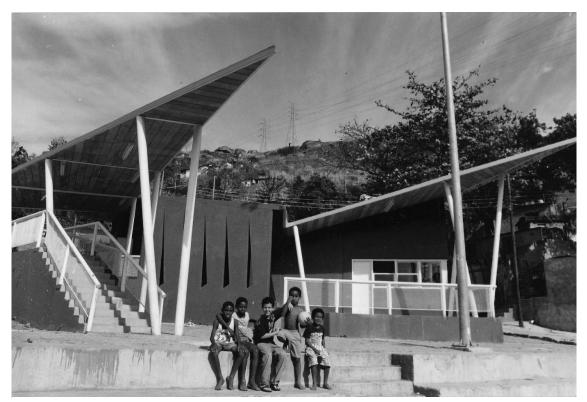
Figure 5. Jorge Jáuregui. Fubá Campinho, centro comunitário. Courtesy Jorge Jáuregui.

impregnable disposition. When Jáuregui began to examine the rifts of Rio de Janeiro, his primary objective as an architect was to dignify and improve the quality of life in marginal settlements. Jáuregui's engagement with the question of informality can be traced to his incorporation into the "Favela-Bairro project" (1994-2001) under the leadership of Luiz Paulo Conde. The Favela-Bairro program is an interdisciplinary strategy aimed at converting dilapidated areas of favelas into functional communities or neighborhoods.[10] Led by Jáuregui, the initiatives developed range from miniscule interventions, such as the straightening of a pedestrian street, to projects derived from community participation including community centers, laundries, and playgrounds; as well as larger complexes such as public transportation centers.[11] The main objectives of the interventions facilitate movement within the favelas, address health and environmental issues, and as a whole, raise the self-esteem of residents.

One of the projects that best defines the amalgamation between theory and practice developed by Jáuregui is a proposal for the urban integration of the Fubá and Campinho favelas. This intervention consists of integrating two adjacent favelas that were previously unconnected, while creating a new public space capable of hosting various programs such as a playground, social center for the elderly, training classrooms, cooking school, and football field (Fig 4, 5). To facilitate access to this new urban space, pedestrian paths and staircases were designed to connect pre-existing corridors in each favela.

A critical question of the Favela-Bairro projects developed by Jáuregui is that together with interventions in buildings and spaces (manifest urbanism), his work contributes to critical infrastructure that positively affects the daily lives of people. Thus, it addresses such basic and necessary issues as the installation of drinking water networks, sewage drainage, and the provision of waste disposal and treatment centers (latent urbanism).[12] As each favela has its own unique characteristics, the proposed solutions are specific to the needs of residents, topographical conditions, mobility, and access to public transport.

A distinctive quality of Jáuregui's trajectory is his consideration of the informal city as a framework for theoretical speculation. His writings reveal a marked interest and knowledge of diverse disciplines, ranging from psychology to economics, from art to political science, and from sustainability to philosophy. Jáuregui insistently rejects the prejudices that informal settlements receive from Brazilian society. Conversely, his proposal rescues and values the crude creativity and vigor existing in the favelas. "From our disciplinary perspective," he says, "we are particularly interested in the vital aspect of the informal."[13]

Rethinking the Informal

Although informal urbanism, in its diverse variants, has been a constant throughout the history of humanity, only in the most recent decades have architecture and urbanism begun to focus on the characteristics, qualities, and potentialities of this emergent phenomenon. Two issues that deserve to be highlighted. The first consists of the social and cultural conditions associated with marginality of the settlements, which can be seen in how their residents have been, and continue to be, victims of stigmatization and discrimination. For those in the "formal city" of San Diego, Buenos Aires or Rio de Janeiro, the "others" are perceived as undesirable and dangerous, living in spaces that must be definitively avoided and isolated.

The second issue involves a re-evaluation of the conventions of the architectural project. The paradigm of the traditional project, in which the role of the designer consists of preparing plans, drawings, models, and specifications. Parameters that are taken for

granted in the design of a project for the formal city, such as the presence of a client, the verification of a site, a budget, and the pre-existence of legal, frameworks, appear almost inconsequential when considered for the informal city. These conditions imply the need to elaborate new design tactics, where the project is understood as a process that unfolds in a continuous state of fluidity, change, and permutability. Some of the guidelines destined to contribute to the definition of a new paradigm of informal urban interventions are: 1) intense analysis of the context including surveys as well as urban mappings of mobility conditions, transportation, sewage networks, and access to educational and health facilities; 2) recognition and appreciation of the cultural identity of the community; 3) establishment of participatory channels, in which inhabitants can express their opinions, desires, and aspirations; 4) consideration of multiple and variable scales, in which the intervention may include smaller projects such as a mural or a laundry, as well as larger interventions such as new urban paths, extension of public transport networks, and the development of community facilities.

This list of guidelines will inevitably vary and be adjusted according to each context. Our survey will reveal a range of architectural interventions for informal settlements that act as collective and participatory initiatives. Therefore, the architect, in addition to contributing their creative and intellectual potential embraces their capacity to generate concepts and deliver built projects that serve as both the recipient and interpreter of interactions among multiple agencies. These new conditions demand an intense reconsideration of what constitutes the fundamental nature of architectural and urban design projects conceived for informal settlements, as well as a renewed pact of understanding between the designer and society.

Endnotes

1. The military dictatorship that governed Argentina between 1976 and 1983 advanced a violent policy of eradication of marginal settlements, forcing a reduction of 94% of its population. See Janches, Flavio. *Public Space in the Fragmented City*. Nobuko, 2012, 61.

2. Among the many architects and thinkers who exerted an intense criticism of modern architecture and planning during the 1960s, the writings of Jane Jacobs and Aldo Rossi are notable. See Jacobs, Jane. The Death and Life of Great American Cities. New York: Vintage, 1992 (orig. public. 1961); and Rossi, Aldo, The Architecture of the City. Cambridge, MA, and London: MIT Press, 1982 (orig. public. 1966).

3. We draw attention to a central question regarding this essay: we understand that strategic interventions in informal settlements do not constitute the ideal and permanent solution, but, here and now, they appear as the best option.

4. Lepik, Andres. *Small Scale, Big Change: New Architectures of Social Engagement*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2010.

5. The Project for Villa Tranquila lead by Janches was developed in conjunction with workshops and design studios at the Architecture Academy of Amsterdam, Harvard University Graduate School of Design, and the University of Buenos Aires. The initiative received the support of the from the PlaySpace Foundation from Holland, and the Municipality of Avellaneda. See Janches, Flavio. "Whose city is it?" In Ellen Braae, Henriette Steiner (eds.). *Routledge Research Companion to Landscape Architecture*. Routledge, 2019, 285-293.

6. Janches, "Whose city is it?"

7. Sarmiento, Domingo Faustino. *Facundo, o Civilización y barbarie*, Penguin Random House Grupo Editorial Argentina, 2018 (orig. public. 1845).

8. McGuirk, Justin. *Radical Cities: Across Latin America in Search of a New Architecture*. Verso Books, 2014, 116.

9. "Cidade maravilhosa" (Marvelous City) is a 1935 song that was written and composed by André Filho. It has since become the

anthem of Rio de Janeiro. See Terra, Antonia. *Como eu Ensino. História das Cidades Brasileiras*. Editora Melhoramentos, 2012, 46.

10. Machado, Rodolfo. *The Favela-Bairro Project: Jorge Mario Jáuregui Architects*. Harvard University Graduate School of Design, 2003, 52.

11. Machado. *The Favela-Bairro Project*, 23.

12. The expressions "manifest urbanism" and "latent urbanism" used by Jáuregui derive from psychoanalytic theories developed by Sigmund Freud in which dreams contain a manifest content (what we remember), and a latent content (what needs to be interpreted). See essay by Jáuregui "Arquitectura, Urbanismo y Compromiso Social" *http://www.jauregui.arq.br/arq-urb.html*, accessed 03/18/2019, 9:15 pm; and Freud, Sigmund. *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Wordsworth Editions, 1997, (orig. public. 1900).

13. *http://www.jauregui .arq.br/econ_info.html*; accessed 03/18/2019, 9:15 pm