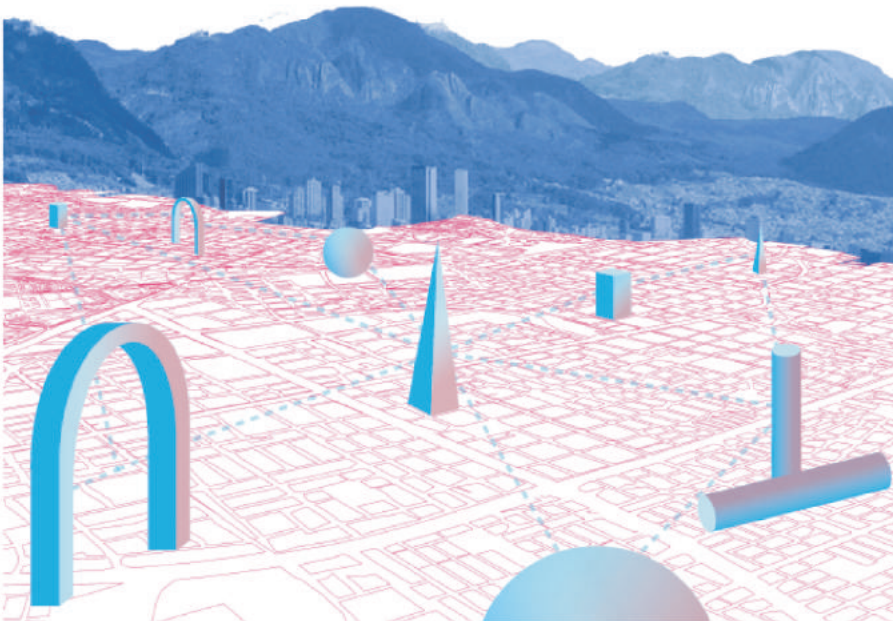Informal Networks - Project Development + Reflection
Robert Stubbs | 4664663

0. Collaborative Framework

The theoretical and contextual framework for this project has been developed in collaboration with Emilia Golebiewska. The decision to work together has been made due to very similar research interests, and the belief that while working together we can devote more time and attention to the project, producing a more in-depth research. The outcome of the research has resulted in a jointly developed network of interventions, meant to loosely work together as a whole, but which could also be read independently. As such, moving towards the design of the project, we have decided to split up and work individually on producing detailed designs on separate sites – two for myself and two for Emilia. The location of the sites, as well as the reasoning behind each intervention will be explained in detail further on in this paper. Because of the collaborative nature of the project, a collective 'we' has been used to explain the development and nature of the project, as well as to reflect on the process as a whole.

1. A continuous loop of research and design:

The following project has arrived at its most recent state through multiple cycles of renewal. In each stage of this process, the programmatic brief, locations, scale, and general scope of the design have been constantly changed based on lessons learned from a series of trial and error attempts. However, the one constant through all of these attempts has been the desire to search for ways to imagine an infrastructure that is more inclusive for informality in the city of Bogota. Therefore, it seems evident that there has never been a clear divide between time spent designing vs researching, as the two activities have continuously informed the successes and failures of each other.

In my previous studies, research was typically about searching for the tools that an architect / urban planner should employ to address a given issue. The development of this project has been considerably different from this approach, largely due to the degree of sensitivity required when designing critically within the topic of informality in a foreign context. For this reason, much of the research conducted during the graduation studio has been not only about the tools an architect should use, but instead the role that a designer should take when designing for/with/or through marginalized communities.

Fig 1. Street vendor in Teusaquillo, Bogota

Various positions that the architect could potentially take to design an urban intervention were researched through related case studies. These positions fall at different points along the top-down / bottom-up spectrum of design. While each of these positions appeared to have their own merits during initial discussions, the formulation of design proposals inevitably revealed their inherent contradictions and fundamental flaws. Without these test trail, new frameworks of research would not have been able to be developed.

2. Relationship between project and studio:

The central themes of the studio 'positions in practice: constructing the commons in the Latin American Metropolis' have undoubtedly shaped the project into what it has become. One of the key themes that have guided the course of research has been the appropriation of public space. From the start of the MSc 3 semester, our research has been geared towards video, written, and drawn documentation of the activity performed on street corners, in plazas, and around parks. This focus on the use of the built environment, rather than the built environment itself, has led us to study the actors that most frequently inhabit public space in the city of Bogota – people such as informal vendors, waste pickers, the homeless, cleaners, ect.. Following these initial prompts, our project strategy involves the initiation of interventions that are locally specific, and operate as public amenities that consider the involvements and contributions of different local individuals and groups. Furthermore, with this underlying logic, the project itself has been presented first as a framework of strategic collaborations that gives equal attention to the creation of the interventions in the form of relationship diagrams and visual storytelling as it does to its so-called final products.

A central theme of the chair of Methods & Analysis of critically questioning conventional definitions of architecture that subscribe to the notions of problem-solving has also informed the way in which we approached the selected topic of study. Under this influence, we have attempted to broaden our definition of informality beyond those created from typical binary thought processes. To begin this process we have looked at the work of different theorists that aim to address conflicts resulting from generalizations associated with the established dichotomy of formal and informal.[1] One of such thinkers is Rahul Mehrotra, who introduced the theory of the kinetic and static city as an episteme that moves beyond the humanitarian dimension of informality, and instead sees it as a means of generating innovation in response to imposed constraints.[2]
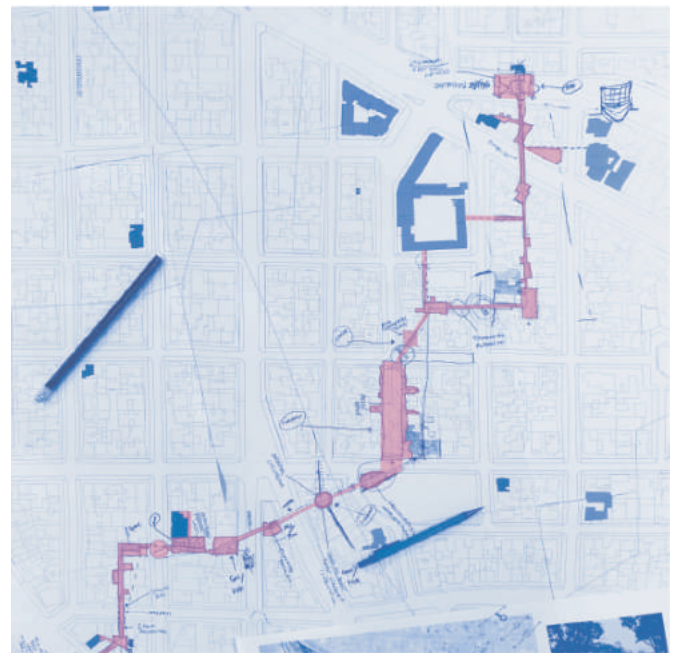

Fig 2. Plans of first design phase

3. Elaboration on research method and approach:

"Western methods of historical inscription dismiss the architectures produced by common people in the act of survival. By this I mean (…) also the appropriations of space that they carry out in the centres of cities in order to live and work, to survive in a world system that is adverse to poverty". [3]

- Felipe Hernandez, 'Bhabha for Architects'

An approach that involves critical reflection on what is typically recognized and valued as legitimate architecture has been chosen for the following project. The aim of this approach is to see informal appropriation as a creative solution, rather than issue to be solved, which can be analysed with the same levels of rigor and depth as architectures of the formal city. However, products of the informal (kinetic) city differ from the formal (static) city by how they are represented through public spaces and human occupation, rather than by physical / built objects. As such, to grasp its dynamic nature, the kinetic city demands methods of analysis that are based on its qualities of flow, indeterminacy, and instability. This requires implementing methods of research that touch on the temporal, transient, and flexible qualities of a particular place, which in this case is the neighborhood of Teusaquillo.

We felt that the best way to approach our research question was to use methods which would allow us to understand people and their relationship to space, rather than space itself; to understand people through the objects that they use to appropriate the city. Therefore, the research methods that we have used thus far in our project are those within the fields of material culture and literary analysis.

The interdisciplinary research field of material culture has stemmed from the broader scientific fields of anthropology, sociology, and archaeology as the study of objects and their relationship to other objects, people, and the meanings we attach to them.[4] Therefore, to form a better understanding of what is the nature of informal living as present in the Teusaquillo neighbourhood in Bogotá, we have performed a study on a selection of vendors that operate in Teusaquillo's informal economy. By using the drawing techniques (technical, diagrammatic, perspective, axonometric, ect..) to analyze these case studies, we were able to uncover some of the recurring strategies and mechanisms that informal actors used to navigate constraints imposed on them by the static/formal city.
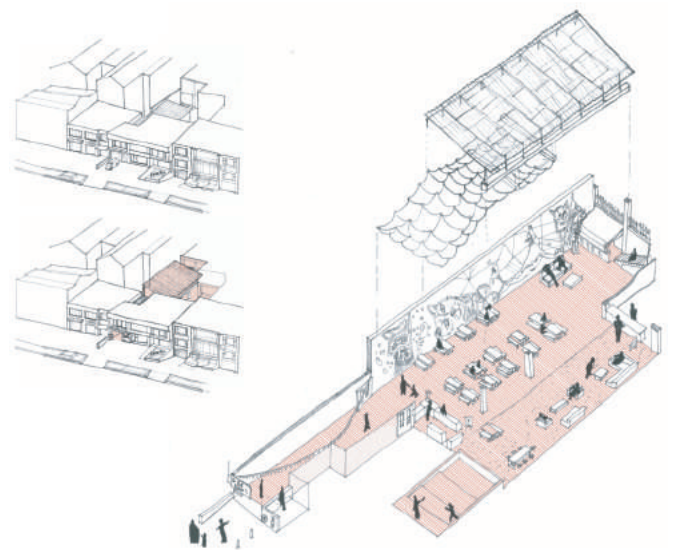

Fig 3. Sketch of contextual analysis

However, what we found missing in this study were the aspects of time and transformation, which we have sought to address through the support of an additional method of analysis: the one of literary narrative.

What has been thus far established, and what forms the argument for using the literary method as a means of understanding and producing architecture for our graduation project, is as follows. Our focus lies with the informal, 'kinetic' actors operating in the city. The stage for these actors, the space of openness, is the city street - a street as it is in reality, as can be experienced, rather than what is visible on an urban plan. To understand the nature and social relationships of the informal actors in the city, we have used the literary narrative method as a way to capture the intangible which cannot be revealed through practices of drawing. In the foreword to Klaske Havik's book Urban Literacy, Juhani Pallasmaa names the narrative approach as 'crucial' in developing architectural empathy. Learning about things and places experientially allows us to imagine what living in that place is actually like, and helps to understand change; to analyze variables that are not fixed to a given location or time. [5] This is particularly useful when considering informal actors such as street vendors, who are constantly moving with the flows of city life.

4. Elaboration on the relationship of the graduation project to a wider social, professional and scientific framework – addressing the transferability of the project results:

Our approach to design is inherently against the direct replication of solutions or strategies in multiple contexts. This is because we believe that to design for the marginalized requires an alternative method of than detached, copy-paste replication. However, Issues pertaining to informal economies exist throughout all of Colombia, Latin America, and the rest of the world; therefore it is our hope that the values and sensibilities of our work contribute to future studies elsewhere. While the presentation of our project includes specific built models and spatial configurations, it is not these products that we see as being transferred to other, though maybe similar, situations. This would be contradictory to our original intentions of searching for alternatives to abstract and imposed forms of urban planning that have led to the current state of tension between the static and the kinetic that exists in our cities today.

Instead, it is new ideas on the positioning of the architect that are viewed as contributing to the professional discourse. The work of this project aims to communicate how a neighborhoods such as Teusaquillo can be viewed
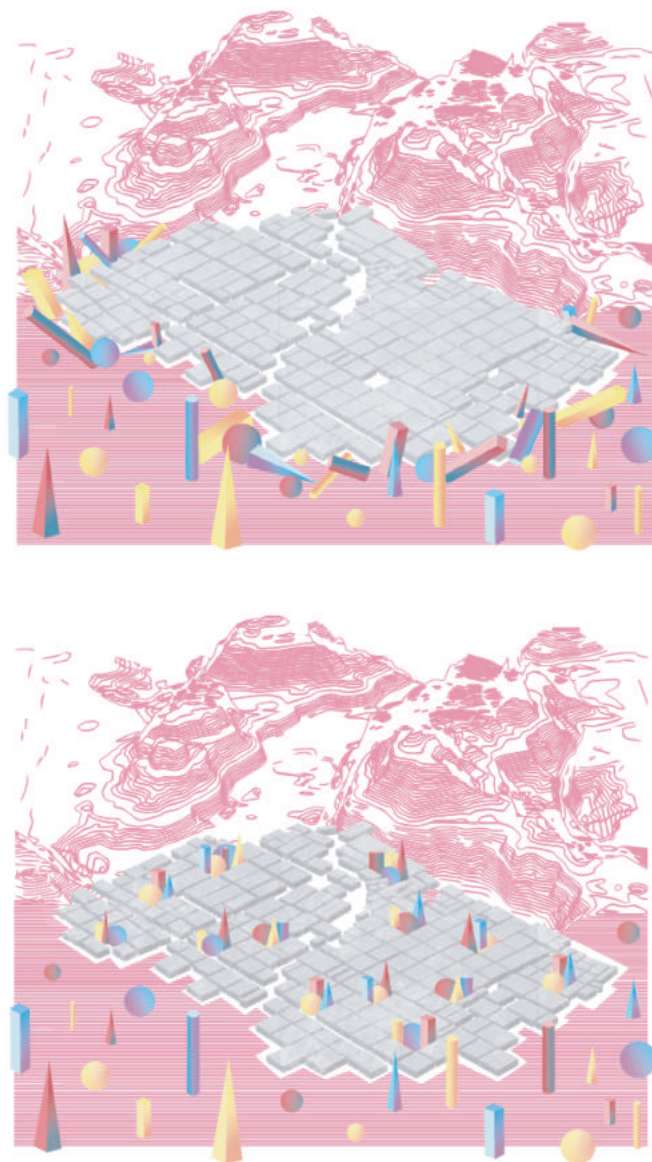

Fig 4. Diagram of historical exclusion and goals for an inclusive infrastructure

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by architects not only through spatial and economic terms, but instead as urban ecologies that are defined by a complex array of relationships that can be altered, for better or worse, by carefully negotiated and placed urban interventions. With this approach, the responsibilities of a designer can be expanded to include establishing meaningful relationships and new forms of communication between groups within a particular community. In this scenario, the architect relinquishes any notion of sole ownership to establish a design brief in dialogue with those who will co-author the work.

7. Social and Ethical Dilemmas:

There were several ethical dilemmas that we have encountered during the development of our project. One of the very first concerns that we had to face was the simple fact of us being two students, educated within a Western context (both European and North American), trying to develop a project located in Colombia, in South America. When signing up for the studio of Methods and Analysis we have, of course, known that we will be placed within an unfamiliar context.

Questions arose – what right do we, with our cultural context and specific identities, have to design an architectural project in the South American context? What is our relationship to Colombia's colonial past and how can we propose an intervention which would not be in any way judgmental or patronizing? Even within the limits of an academic exercise, which would bear no effect on the reality of Bogotá, the responsibility that we have as designers, and that we hope to carry forward as we move towards embarking on our professional career, is to approach any context with the utmost care and respect that it deserves.

After returning from the field trip, the questions regarding our position towards designing in the given context only multiplied. As outlined in previous paragraphs, while in Colombia, our attention was captured by the presence of informal actors on every major street in Bogotá. The sheer number of street vendors in the city is overwhelming – it is impossible to overlook them and yet, from what we could see while investigating the city, the urban infrastructure of Bogotá does not account for their presence. With good intentions, we have decided to focus our graduation project on understanding how these informal vendors operate and on proposing the design with the informal vendors as a main source of inspiration and as the main user.

Fig 5. San Victorino informal market in Bogota 1991

Fig 5. Plaza de San Victorino 2018 - space reclaimed by Penalosa's government

During the course of the project we have oscillated between extremes – from a top-down urban masterplan, to a completely bottom-up small initiatives. The top-down approach wasn't considerate enough of the realities of the informal actors in Bogotá, and was a response that was too out of proportion to be taken seriously within the framework of the investigation. The completely bottom-up approach relied too heavily on the imagined narratives of potential users – using them more as justifications of certain design decisions, rather than as a way of empathizing and exploring.

In the end, we have settled on something in-between. By situating our project between exisitng institutions in the context we are working, the project has taken both a more critical focus and become more honest in its ambitions. [6] As mentioned before, the socio-economic situation of Bogotá, of which the informal actors are victim and signifier, cannot be remedied by an architectural intervention. As such, our response could not be based purely on the provision of amenities, at the risk of creating a project that is prescriptive. The resolution to create spaces of gathering, with an increased number of infrastructural opportunities, and carrying a symbolic meaning was our attempt at creating architecture that is respectful and sensitive to its environment. The mix of bottom-up and council led approach also lends some legitimacy to our proposal, with real-world organizations that could be a part of the project if it ever came to reality. The final decision for the four interventions to contain functions for both the informal actors, as well as the residents of the neighborhood of Teusaquillo or any passer- that might be present, hopes to ensure that through including one type of user, the design does not exclude another.

Endnotes:

[1] Hernández, Felipe, Peter Kellett, and Lea K. Allen, eds. Rethinking the Informal City: Critical Perspectives from Latin America. Remapping Cultural History, v. 11. New York: Berghahn Books, 2010.

[2] Mehrotra, Rahul. "Negotiating the Static and Kinetic Cities: The Emergent Urbanism of Mumbai." In Other Cities, Other Worlds: Urban Imaginaries in a Globalizing Age, edited by Andreas Huyssen, 327. Durham: Duke University Press, 2008.

[3] Hernández, Felipe. Bhabha for Architects. Thinkers for Architects 04. London ; New York: Routledge, 2010.

[4] Lucas, Ray. Research Methods for Architecture. London: Laurence King Publishing, 2016.

[5] Havik, Klaske. Urban Literacy: Reading and Writing Architecture. Rotterdam: NAI010 Publ, 2014.

[6] Fraser, Murray. "The Cultural Context of Critical Architecture." The Journal of Architecture 10, no. 3 (June 1,2005):317–22.https://doi.org/10.1080/1360236050016 2287.