

BECOMING THE OUROBOROS

Reflections on Master Thesis

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The urban ecosystem that is the informal settlement has never been more prevalent than it is today. Over 1 billion people live informally, with this number projected to grow to 4.6 billion by 2050.¹ Often cast in a negative light due to valid challenges such as the difficulty of law enforcement, the common lack of fundamental services, and low structural resiliency, informal urban landscapes provide a low barrier entry to the vast opportunities the city provides. At their very core they allow people to produce their own shelter in locations they cannot afford to inhabit formally. While these spaces are by definition unorganised, this does not make them illogical. The production of space is governed by hyper local social agreements and overlapping networks of connection. Functionally the urban landscape grows sequentially with the community, as structures densify, so too do social relationships and cultural expressions one step at a time. Therefore, despite the multitude of shortfalls present in informal settlements, the urban structure itself is valuable as an expression of the community that inhabits it and the opportunities it affords them. Further, the structures they erect and landscape they produce are no less a home than a planned environment. Unfortunately, this spatial value is often not recognised. Despite their continued growth, fuelled by rapid urbanisation, informal spaces are being encroached upon, formalised and outright destroyed by many government authorities who in turn cannot provide adequate social housing. This is happening particularly in city centres, relegating the inhabitants to the urban fringes, leading to egregious inequality in which those who need access to the most opportunities and services, are geographically excluded from them.

Becoming the Ouroboros investigates this conflict as it plays out in the central Panama City suburb of Boca La Caja. In doing so it proposes an alternative view of the informal settlement, in which the challenges of these spaces can be faced without vilifying their urban structures. Just because space was produced informally does not make it inherently valueless, nor does it need to impose a life devoid of basic services for its inhabitants. My research of the site was guided by a forensic analysis of current and historic photography, maps, interviews, videos and other data points that provided insight into the community. I found this to be highly valuable and interesting as not many suburbs are so clearly a physical manifestation of the people that inhabit/ed them. In this way it was possible to understand aspects of the society like an archaeologist studying an ancient city might. Of course, in this case the citizens of Boca La Caja are very much present, and its century of habitation has formed a tightly knit and highly religious community. In fact, it is this communal strength that has been the greatest defence against formal encroachment as I discovered while researching their municipal relations. Despite many government attempts to relocate them, Boca La Caja has prevailed due to the united power of the collective. This has led the government to begin to provide public services without destroying the site. My project is designed to not only retain this method of informal sequential development, but also perpetuate it.

1. United Nations. 2019. Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable. UNSTATs. Retrieved 14 of May 2024 from <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2019/goal-11/>

So far I have discussed extensively about informality, but where does the architect fit into this? The field of architecture is not often associated with informality, yet the expertise the architect holds along with other built environment professionals can be invaluable for addressing the issues associated with informal settlements. My project centres around a space I have dubbed a “Tinker Station”, tasked with the sequential development of Boca La Caja in deep partnership with the current population. A tinker was once a person who would come and fix household utensils, in an era before mass consumption. Today financial and other barriers still impact many low-income people from participating in this mass consumption, and not just when it comes to utensils anymore but also structures. Therefore, my proposal aims at turning architectural, and other built environment expertise into a public service in order to address the habitation challenges of informal settlements. Regardless of whether it is formal or not, people are already building their own spaces, and in this way the architectural profession can help them produce structures that are more resilient, healthy, and stable.

When designing this space, I initially struggled to align my theoretical role of the architect as an assistant to the collective planning of the community, with my process of design. The location I chose ended up being the large PABO vegetable oil factory that currently bisects the site. This factory consumes the geographic centre of the space, therefore I intended to increase its permeability through large, specific, and top-down architectural processes. My initial goal was to alter the entire site, but in doing so I would leave no space for the process of communal growth. I therefore began to redefine my role, not as a producer of architectural and urban space, but as a catalyst of potential habitation methods. Eventually my intervention reached its current scope, with designed aspects deliberately aimed at introducing different material alterations and expressions into the community’s construction arsenal, while leaving space for collective intervention and design. In this way the responsibility of the architect involves adequately recognising what we cannot design as much as what we can.

As I did not visit the site, consistent and in-depth research became my only connection with the community. This meant that as new things were revealed to me my ideas changed but so too did my research direction. My research into the PABO Oil factory initially focused on understanding the structure as an object. It had been there for as long as the informal settlement, and spatially seemed to like it could be an important local employer. However later research revealed this to be false, with many people instead working in the fishing industry. In this way the structure no longer acted as an anchor of the settlement, rather a barrier that bisects the urban landscape. This led me to focus on increasing the permeability of the structure, particularly at its territorial edge, rather than attempting to understand the functionality of the structure. Further, as I looked at cutting and carving as a method of reforming the factory, I found hints to a steel substructure that had been added retroactively for stability. I saw this as a kind of urban prosthetic, and from here have used the action of cutting and idea of the prosthetic to inform my design.

I believe my final project, is a highly relevant approach to the improvement of informal living standards transferable across the globe. Informal settlements will continue to grow rapidly for the foreseeable future, and they have a mass of manpower who are willing to build their environment. Therefore, rather than viewing it as a spatial problem, we can treat it as a method of social mobility and community production. Rather than putting the financial burden of funding, constructing, maintaining, and allocating social housing on the many undeveloped nations often impacted by informal settlements, funding can be redirected to create selective improvements that capitalise on collective labour from people who will directly benefit from their work. In no way is this a silver bullet, it is more to say that the work is already being done, perhaps we can build upon what is already there, rather than constructing space formally from scratch.

Draft Drawings Included:

- 1:10.000 Site Map
- 1:500 Base Plan
- 1:500 Alteration Plan
- 1:100 L0 Plan
- 1:100 L1 Plan
- 1:100 L2 Plan
- 1:100 L3 Plan
- 1:100 Elevations
- 1:100 Sections
- 1:25 Facade Fragment
- 1:10 Facade Detail

Drawings Not Included:

- Construction storyboard
- 1:100 Carving Plans
- 1:25 Carving Section
- Unspecified drawings present at the presentation