

Positioning the Architecture Profession to Confront Informality

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Full book available at:

https://issuu.com/robertorocco/docs/confronting_informality_report_2018

The world is fast urbanizing and most of this fast-paced urbanization is happening in what we pithily refer to as ‘informal settlements’. The symposium ‘Confronting Informality’ does a much needed two-fold intervention. First, to bring together various actors to think about urban informality; and second, by this intervention, instigate the students of architecture and urbanism to develop themselves to confront informality. I strongly believe that on one hand this will develop a field of creative thinkers to develop solutions for contemporary grim urban realities, and on the other hand, question the role of architects and urbanists to intervene in hitherto unexplored situations.

Although, informality has been a research subject since the early 1970s, architects have had much lesser impact on the major global debates when compared to other social scientists. It was probably Rem Koolhaas’s studio on Lagos during mid-1990s, that caught the imagination of the interventionist architects and made the discussions on urban informality a serious affair amongst architects. These discussions have evolved ever since, but has led to a more nuanced questioning of the architecture profession. This has resulted in multiple conundrums, two of which I will touch upon. First, space being the main apparatus of an architect, got problematized by Lefebvre (especially after his 1974 book was translated to English titled ‘Production of Space’ during the early 1990s.). Space or the production of space was conceptualized and thereafter strongly politicized as a tool of (global) capital to manifest itself. This popularized the war cry of ‘right to the city’ (although more formalized in Latin America) and pictured architects as an agent of the capital for this purpose. Second, informality discussions, starting from the late 1990s has moved beyond clustering of people or places. This moved the focus of scholarly debates from tangible informal economy, slums, or housing, to informality as an intangible governmentality. This could be summarized as the exploration of politics of informality. Architects, the key agent of physical manifestations of global collective dreams (e.g. the Habitat III) are now grappling to redefine their role, i.e., if informality is no more a tangible subject, then how to we confront it? These debates have resurfaced more recently after Alejandro Aravena won the Pritzker Prize and thereafter his critical curatorial practice at the Venice Biennale of Architecture in 2016.

The fast-paced urbanization process of our times has indeed resulted in reduced provision of urban services and marginalized a considerably large set of people across the globe. There are local issues of access to housing, water, and electricity to larger

questions of citizenship rights. These issues may be pronounced more in the so-called informal settlements, but are not a result of informality alone. For example, only about half the urban poor in the city of Delhi, live in slums. Therefore, how can the problems of slums, be guiding our strategies to confront informality?

Events such as this puts these critical questions into enquiry from various disciplinary positions within architecture. Creativity binds our various positions; thus, we can surely devise creative methods to problematize our profession to confront informality.