

Informality and planning education: opportunities for innovation?

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The global financial crisis and subsequent austerity measures in the North and South have brought into stark relief, the limitations of the formal economy in absorbing labour, and the diminishing role of the state in providing access to basic services and housing. Further, in many cities of the South, institutional and legal provisions remain detached from the everyday urban realities and are unable to create a platform for inclusive city planning and service provision. Informal urbanization has therefore continued to become a feature of cities in the global South, as evident in the proliferation of informal settlements on the fringes and on 'leftover' land in urban spaces and the increasing importance of the informal economy in providing livelihoods to many. The traditional approach to urban planning, one that emphasizes predictability and control, is ill equipped to deal with the scale at which informality manifests in cities of the global South. Informal settlements not only make up a large portion of the global

South cities but are also a dynamic part of them in physical, social and cultural terms. Fiori and Brandao (2010: 188) argue that “Urban informality is inexorably interwoven with the city as a whole – at all scales and levels – and has to be seen as another way of being in the city and constructing it.” Informal settlements are also seen as innovative and creative: “Today we recognize the innovative genius of the urban poor in taking advantage of the specific cultural opportunities to survive and improve their living conditions.” (AlSayyad, 1993: 5) . In terms of the built environment they are subject to different interpretations: “We do not believe ‘informal’ means lacking form. It implies, for us, something that arises from within itself and its makers, whose form has not been recognised, but which is subject to rules and procedures potentially as specific and necessary as those that have governed official, formal city-making.” (Brillembourg & Klumpner, 2010: 120) . In this sense, informal settlements as an urban and architectonic subject is deserved to be further studied, not only in terms of poverty and marginality but also to the potential contribution to cities. Planning and architecture schools should be the place for this. This panel explores how the phenomenon of informality is addressed in planning and architecture education from the vantage point of five countries, on three continents, in the global South. The main question is whether informality allows for pedagogical innovation. More pertinent questions are: what form does the inclusion of informality in curricula take (does it have to be in the studio...?), the issues and opportunities for knowledge coproduction as well as understanding who learns from whom – and the implications of this question for curricula design, What is the role of formal education institutions in informal areas? What can the students learn and what can the students give to communities? Is informality close to illegal, and in those terms should the aim be to eradicate it, as traditional views imply? Or is informality an alternative, and in that regard should it be permitted and even promoted, as some alternative views suggest? Is informality a step on the tacit journey towards formality, as some traditional and current views argue? Questions that will be addressed by the panel participants’ presentations. The composition of the panel is intentional in enabling south-south dialogue. Nancy Odendaal, current GPEAN chair and Steering Committee member of the Association of African Planning Schools will be convener.