

Informal morphology: investigating the internal structure of spontaneous settlements

Maddalena Iovene

PHD Candidate, Urban Design Studies Unit, Department of Architecture

University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, UK

maddalena.iovene@strath.ac.uk

The urban outburst of the twenty-first century is mostly happening in the Global South, and yet it is still regarded according to western planning theories (Roy, 2005) with a truly design orientated view of urbanization. This reveals the inability of the urban disciplines to be adaptive and responsive to the alterations of the cultural and economic context of cities over time.

As a matter of fact the emergence of a globalized, large-scale system of city production in the neoliberal economy, which Alexander has shortly named “System B” (Alexander, Neis, & Moore-Alexander, 2012), accompanied by the expanding power of administrative bureaucracies on urban life, has spread patterns of alienation and impersonality among urban residents (Weber, Martindale, & Neuwirth, 1958); and encouraged *socio-spatial fragmentation and divides in cities* (Watson, 2009).

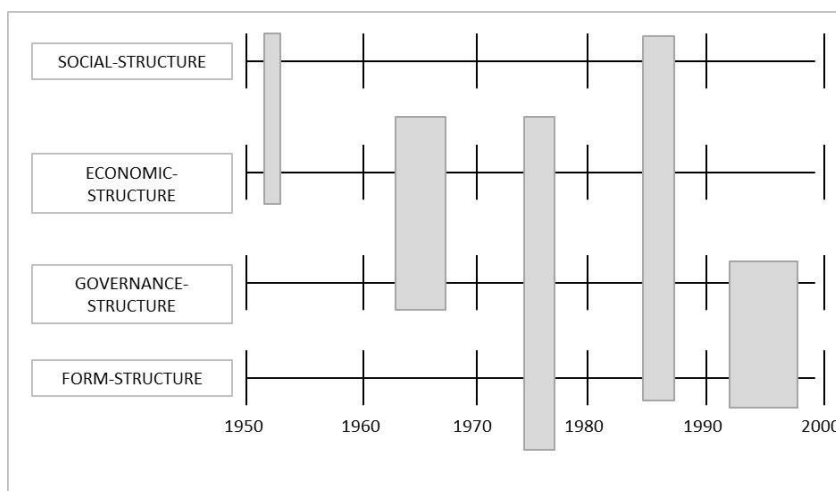
Under this perspective, unplanned or otherwise informal developments around the world, emerged out of forms of less-planned development if not sheer improvisation, have often proven to result in positively underpinning vitality and prosperity in urban change at many levels (Landry & Bianchini, 1995). Current studies on informal settlements explore aspects of their social, economic and physical character, such as housing and community, land tenure, policies of occupation and acquisition, location, size, boundaries and quality of construction materials; however ‘*there has been little effort to develop a model of the internal structure based on the Latin American urban experience*’ (Griffin & Ford, 1980).

Our own research preliminarily identifies the lack of an urban morphology point of view that draws on the tradition in the understanding of informal settlements as a gap of knowledge that is relevant to our ability to deliver effective policies of urban

regeneration, especially in the context of the urbanization of the Global South, against the self-referential strategies of public service provision that resulted in several failures (Balducci, 1996).

Consequently, bearing in mind the notion of the city as a complex organism made of units in constant relation with each other and with the whole, we intend to analyse both the physical product – the form – and the non-physical processes – these being defined as ‘*the interrelations between humans and physical features*’ (Kropf, 2009) over time.

We implement a three-step procedure: *i)* identification of a *conceptual framework* based on evidence from literature review and secondary research, *ii)* *test and review of the conceptual framework on the ground, through a case-study research on real informal settlements in Lima, Peru.* Cases will be scrutinized in order to develop a four-partite model of their development over time from the 1950s to our days, looking at their form as well as social, economic and political structure. On-site investigation will be undertaken including mapping, direct observation, cadastral and archive surveys, and face-to-face interview. The structural analysis will be addressed at five scales: a) the *unit*, b) the *building*, c) the *plot*, d) the *block*, and e) the *settlement* (comprehensive of public spaces and street network). *iii)* Finally, maps will be produced and commented, that we name Temporal Settlement Matrix, which bring together in a visually unitary model the evolution of the four mentioned structures at the five mentioned scales.



Conceptual diagram of the overlapping structures in time

The definition of the analysis structure establishes our research firmly into the field of urban morphology (Whitehand, Gu, Conzen, & Whitehand, 2014). In particular, we draw from the “Caniggian” tradition the aforementioned multi-scalar structure of the geographical components to be analysed (Caniggia & Maffei, 2008), which shapes the definition of our model. On the basis of this scalar hierarchy, the parallel hierarchies of their social, economic and political structures will need to be worked out. Initial assumptions have been developed concerning which these should be; however, this largely remains matter for the further development of our research, especially the fieldwork on real settlement.

The fieldwork will take place in Peru, an interesting demographic context, for it is representative of Latin American fast-growing predominantly urban areas. In particular few settlements among the *Barriadas* or *Barrios Jovenes* at the outskirts of Lima will be analysed and compared.

It is hoped that the results of our research will contribute to expand the evidence on which the evolution of informal settlements is understood, by means of a specific urban morphology perspective on it.

Ultimately, our goal is to devise, in the way informal settlements still grow and evolve as a vehicle of social and human change, more general patterns which may inform urban planning in the Global North as much as in the Global South, following a line of thought that comes from Turner (Turner, 1976; Turner & Fichter, 1972) and Koenigsberger before him (Koenigsberger, 1986) and links up to the current debate on the “right-to-build” in the UK (Parvin, 2011).

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