



Off The Map : Learning from informal cities in Latin America

"Learning from the existing landscape is a way of being revolutionary for an architect. Not the obvious way, which is to tear down Paris and begin again, as Le Corbusier suggested in the 1920's but another, more tolerant way; that is, to question how we look at things."
Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour, 1972.

According to the World Bank, since WWII global population has increased from two billion to 5.5 billion, and nearly all this growth has taken place in the developing world, where the urban population has grown from 300 million to 1.7 billion today. Most of these urban dwellers live in communities that, while composed of buildings that range from simple shacks to permanent structures, belong to an urban geography that is literally "off the map": undocumented, illegal, mobile, ephemeral, and generally beyond the reach of government services and infrastructure. Lacking even an agreed-upon descriptive term- they are variously referred to as slums, informal settlements, shantytowns, or unplanned cities – they are often seen as nothing but undifferentiated pockets of misery, wracked by poverty, crime and unsanitary conditions: in other words, an unfortunate but inevitable waste product of the uncontrolled urban growth that characterizes our time. This view is as unfortunate as it is misguided. While undeniably precarious in construction, unplanned cities exhibit underlying urban and architectural patterns of remarkable resilience, and that moreover reflect their inhabitants' enduring cultural values. Built without the assistance of architects and/or planners, they are folkloric expressions of a given people worthy of study.

Given this framework, the seminar will initially focus on the study and analysis of informal settlements throughout Latin America. The ultimate objective of the course is to develop a new understanding of these communities, in order to formulate effective modes of engagement with the informal. In addition, the relationship between the formal and the informal will be the basic platform of our investigations throughout the semester. Each participant in the course is expected to complete readings, participate in discussions, and complete a research proposal.

Professor: Adib Cure, Spring 2012