
Learning from Cairo: What Informal Settlements Can (and Should) Teach Us



Written by [Magda Mostafa](#)

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The following essay, written by [Magda Mostafa](#), is an excerpt from the book "[Learning from Cairo: Global Perspectives and Future Visions](#)," a collection of reflections from a three-day symposium of the same name. Here, Mostafa focuses on the need to accept informal communities as a reality, not an exception, and argues that conventional architecture practice and education must begin equipping architects to "address the potentials and problems of such parallel modes of existence in our built environment."

It would be a disservice if the debate spurred at the "Learning from Cairo" symposium were to be confined to the hypothetical. It is our responsibility to extend it to both the professional realm as well as

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majority of the architectural product in our city exists without architects? How can we further propagate a singular top-down mode of practice in our teaching when it's malfunctioning at best and corrupt or absent at its worst? When this conventional mode is only viable in neatly packaged projects with clear financing, educated clients and formal frameworks? How can we continue to teach our students, the architects of the future generation, to only be equipped to operate within a small portion of the built environment- ignoring the massive built environment and user groups often represented on maps as solid black "informal areas".

This phenomena can no longer be blacked-out, and it is time for academia to begin educating its architects-to-be at least to be minimally aware, if not proficiently trained, to address the potentials and problems of such parallel modes of existence in our built environment.

The answer is not an either/or scenario. Conventional practice must be viewed as the scaffolding of standards, codes and best practices; despite the limitations it may present in our current socio-economic environment, it remains the only foundation from which good architecture can emerge. On the other hand informal modes of development can no longer be ignored nor labeled as something to be tolerated until they can be removed. Particularly post-January 25th, when the ethos of an entire population has shifted from top-down to bottom-up (and taking things into your own hands seems to be the modus operandi of the day), informal practice- for lack of a better word- in [Cairo](#) can no longer be ignored. New roles must emerge to mitigate these two poles of practice- in policy making, governance, and education - for the future of the built environment.

The architect should begin to emerge as the mediator of these two seemingly conflicting poles. We need to begin educating our students to prepare for this role. Armed with the technical knowledge of best practice, architectural students should begin engaging in such exchanges and become exposed to this new role of facilitator, perhaps between communities and policy makers, at several scales. Community based learning practice- or CBL- is an excellent pedagogical model for this.

To appropriately navigate this process, however, students must be equally versed in the other pole of the equation- the informal. But to do this we must perhaps first redefine, or at least critically debate the negative connotations associated with this terminology. For the greater half of the past century, since decision-makers historically began cordoning off user groups in distinct urban hinter-lands, informality has been the general term associated with slums, ghettos, squatter settlements and any urban development formed outside of legislative frameworks. With this came a perceived temporality to the existence of such settlements, as areas that would eventually be either destroyed or brought up to standard and
With the proliferation and expansion of such urban areas in many of the world's developing cities, this

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It is this different light that was the ethos of the “Learning from Cairo” conference, and which must now be shifted to our architectural pedagogy.



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On a global scale, the economic platform on which architecture operates has shifted. The current economic crisis has seen the demise of the “star-architecture” of the 90’s and early 2000’s. Simply put we can no longer afford to build the way we have been building. As Ian Harris, director of “ArchiCulture,” the 2013 documentary that discusses the pedagogy of studio education, notes: “design school(s) are feeding into the top down approach of the omnipotent starchitect”. With the demise of this praxis, education must shift to accommodate the emerging role of the architect as a promoter of his work, rather than a recipient of commissions- perhaps even the guerilla architect that designs for a cause, without a singular client. BIG’s Bjarke Ingels, often labeled a “star-architect” himself, commented at the 2012 ACSA Conference on Change in Architectural Education that architects must now define a perceived problem, research and develop a design scheme to address it, and then market it to the various stakeholders and clients. As architectural educators we must gradually shift the responsibility towards the student to define, research, develop, and design their own projects. They have to know how to seek out the client and sell them on a project, rather than vice versa.

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an architecture built on, in and with the existing city. This is embodied in such projects as the Metro Cable and Torre David in Caracas Venezuela. Such projects serve to shift the perception of informal settlements from parasitic to symbiotic, from one of negativity to one of potential. In their work Urban Think Tank heeds a call “to see in the informal settlements of the world a potential for innovation and experimentation, with the goal of putting design in the service of a more equitable and sustainable future”. Other theories, such as Revedin’s Radicant City, one of exchange with the city, rather than imposition, are viable shifts that all architectural students of today need to be aware of, and conversant in. Such theories help support the growth of architects as advocates, mediators and facilitators of a built environment that addresses the city comprehensively and objectively, with expertise yet without prejudice.

In a similar paradigm shift, architectural institutions internationally are moving towards expanding their understanding of architectural practice, and consequently education, to be more comprehensively responsible. In a 2013 communiqué, Albert Dubler, current president of the Union Internationales des Architectes urged architects to take a “leadership role... and stop doing things ‘as usual’ ... (and to) raise awareness of the absolute need for collaboration with all stakeholders of all types of human settlements”. This culminated in the UIA’s current Responsible Architecture Project. Dubler calls for “architecture as a human right” — it falls on the shoulders of educators to train architects that will understand, acknowledge and uphold that human right responsibly and comprehensively.

We need to broaden the roles of our future architects, expanding the field of users whom they will design for and the environments that they must take responsibility for. When the “in”formal (anti-formal) is no longer the exception, is it really still “in”formal? And then how can we call conventional training mainstream? How much more than the majority of our urban areas does the informal have to become before we train our students to understand, address, and ultimately work with it- rather than ignoring or eradicating it.

This is not a call to romanticize informal settlements, with their issues of safety, hygiene, lack of viable infrastructure, etc. However, when a built environment is self-financed, demand-driven, grows incrementally, is compact, has low-energy demands, is walkable, self-sufficient and provides a work-home proximity, how can it be viewed as a failed architecture? If anything, this list of characteristics describing informal settlements in [Cairo](#) reads almost like a sustainability index. Again this is not a call for one solution or another, but rather a call to study these environments, to acknowledge their existence- their potentialities and strengths, to work on, in and with them symbiotically, and - perhaps most importantly - to train our students to do the same.

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and reflections on the events surrounding a three-day symposium of the same name, held at the American University in Cairo's Tahrir Square campus in April, 2013. More information about the conference, including full video documentation of all plenaries and working sessions, can be found at <http://learningfromcairo.org>. Additional information about Cairo's post-revolution urban landscape can be found in the book "Archiving the City in Flux" by the same authors, from CLUSTER Cairo available [here](#).

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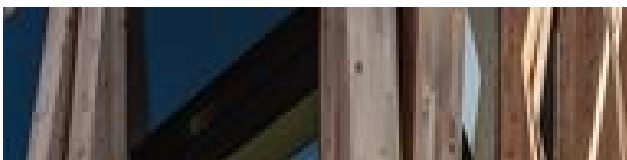
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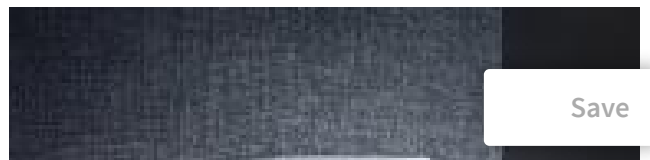
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