

## A Search for Specificity: Learning from Africa

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**Abstract:** As we seek to position ourselves within this new century, the notion of defining an African urban architecture is both complex and compelling. Contemporary African cities are dynamic environments that have an ongoing and complicated evolution. Current realities such as rapid urbanization and globalization have accelerated development and profoundly affected political, social, and economic systems. These realities present an enormous challenge not only to architects seeking to practice within African urban environments but also to those who seek to understand its implications beyond the continent's borders. This paper seeks not so much to define an African urban architecture, but to suggest a framework through which to examine African cities, to discuss means by which architects can engage these environments, and to postulate ways in which that framework of understanding can provide insight for practice beyond the continent.

**Keywords:** Informal sector; Modernism; globalization; Koolhaas; Lagos; Warwick Junction; architecture.

### INTRODUCTION

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, phenomena such as 'industrialization' and 'modernism' significantly defined the development and nature of life in cities around the world. At the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, concepts like "urbanization" and "globalization" have become signifiers of the profound shift defining the character of cities and the lives of their inhabitants. At the macro level, the shift is not only about the individual cities but the role of the cities within the global construct. In 2007, the global urban population surpassed the rural population for the first time (Reiser, Schafer & Schafer 2008:4). And the projection of UN Habitat (Rollnick 2006) is that by 2025, the global urban population would double from its size at the turn of the century to nearly 5 billion people. Although the pressures of such dramatic changes are universally changing the ways in which cities around the world look and operate, they are particularly transforming cities in Less Developed Countries (LDCs). Approximately 95% of the urban growth in the next two decades will be in the LDCs (UN Habitat 2006). In Africa alone, the capital cities witnessed collectively over 1000% increase in growth (Simone 2004:140) and it is expected that by 2030, the continent will be over 50% urban (Rollnick 2006).

The dramatic population increases have had a profound affect on the political, social, and economic structures of these cities, dramatically reshaping the physical urban environment. Industrialization and modernism profoundly affected architectural thought at the height of their respective movements; the phenomena of globalization and urbanization require yet another significant realignment of the profession. This realignment is not only about a change in scope but a change in reference as well. It is expected in the next 10-15 years, that only one city among the More Developed Countries, Tokyo, will be among the top 10 most populous cities in the world. The remainder will be from LDCs. As a result, cities such as Sao Paolo, Mumbai, and Lagos are becoming subjects of scrutiny not only by researchers and professionals in their respective countries, but by their cohorts in the West. Africa in particular has been the subject of several research projects, publications, and exhibitions in recent years. Projects such as the examination of Lagos as part of the Harvard Project on the City by the notable Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas bear witness to this.

The work of Koolhaas and others have brought an interesting and different spotlight to several major cities in Africa and an interesting juxtaposition to the traditional dynamic in which the architectural styles and philosophy of the West have had an authoritative influence within the continent. However, several projects undertaken often

exist in the realm of fascination and superficial engagement. It is not the notion of “learning from Africa” has been incorrect, but rather the way in which the lessons to be learned have been framed.

Using the informal sector as a vehicle, the purpose of this paper is to move beyond the static, surface view of works like Koolhaas to examine how a specificity of context and a cross disciplinary approach to architecture and urbanism can lead to a more productive framework with which to view, analyze, and engage the complex spatial dynamics in these cities.

## INFORMALITY AS A SPATIAL CONSTRUCT

The informal sector is perhaps the most visible reflection of the dramatic impact that the changing political, economic, and social structures have had on our cities. Often emerging to fill the void between the institutional apparatus of the state and the needs and aspirations of an increasing majority of the urban residents, the informal sector was originally defined by anthropologist Keith Hart to describe “a range of activities in the subsistence economy of the urban poor” (Peattie 1987:854). From those humble beginnings, it has come to symbolize not merely a range of activities but a dominant structural system within cities *and* nations. From trade to transport to shelter, the impact of the informal sector is pervasive in the lives of many. The informal sector presently contributes significantly to the GDP of numerous LDCs. In Africa alone, an estimated 75% of the basic needs in the majority of African cities are provided informally (Simone 2004:6).

Though often discussed in political, economic, and social terms, the informal sector has clear and profound spatial properties. For instance, the inadequate housing infrastructure of many major cities within LDCs, has contributed to the explosion of informal settlements; an estimated one in three urban residents live such settlements and by 2050, one third of the world’s population is expected to do so (UN Habitat 2003:xxxii). Another example can be found in the sphere of the street. Street infrastructure is not just a place of people and vehicles, but of trade and collective, opportunistic exchanges based on fluid identities.

On the surface, the fluidity of these physical manifestations can convey the perception of chaos. But there is a complicated relationship between the visible and invisible (Simone 2004:64); underlying the seemingly chaotic surface are often highly interwoven and organized relationships and networks. Informal settlements, a term which often brings to mind an image of an uncontrolled distribution of ramshackle structures made of scrap materials, are often fairly deliberate in their layouts. Though not necessarily accommodating vehicular passage, a system of paths often allow for access through the settlements. Organization of places for commerce, education, and worship often soon follow, all occurring within spaces and structures that would be traditionally defined as informal.

The level of organization is perhaps even more apparent when looking at spaces of trade. Architect Iain Low notes that in Hillbrow and other inner-city areas of Johannesburg, there are “sophisticated hubs and networks” that support activities such as mealie roasting and selling. The mealie, or corn on the cob, is a staple food for many poor South Africans. Though the trade itself appears chaotic at first sight, coal is delivered at specific sites in the city in the early morning. These sites are locations where there is little opportunity for people to be bothered by the fumes of the tin brazier fires, such as abandoned city blocks. When the smoke has dissipated – generally mid morning – the braziers are “delivered by squads of pedestrian couriers to the city’s numerous ‘street restaurants.’” The mealie vendors, who often also get the mealies from a similar supply network – then roast and sell their goods. (Low 1998:332-333). Thus, this informal activity is not an isolated event. It is a system that is not only a social and economic construct, but a spatial one as well. Its spatial network cuts across the city, consisting of multiple relationships and deliberate choices and actions not prescribed by any ‘formal’ institution or plan.

In Lagos, there exists an example on an even larger scale. The Alaba International Electronics Market was originally started as part of the market in Mushin, an outlying district of Lagos. In 1978, it was moved to its current location, on the far periphery of the city. Since that time, it has become the largest electronics market on the continent and accounts for 75% of West Africa’s electronic trade alone (Belanger, Chung, Comaroff, Cosmas, Gandhi, Hamilton, Ip, Kim, Shepard, Singh, Slayton, Stone & Wahba 2001:702). With 50,000 merchants, the market is massive in scale. Yet, there is a physical, social, and economic organization to its structure. It’s physically divided into three sections, and an association exists to govern its activities. Money from dues levied pay for benefits like services provided by the local government (the market had become so successful that a town has built up around it) (Belanger et al. 2001:702-705). More than just a significant economic representation of the informal sector, the connection between the physical dimension is even more

visible at this scale.

The role of the design professions in the spaces of the informal sector has been mixed. The spaces of the mealie market in Hillbrow and the Alaba International Market were begun and have continued to adapt and develop without formal plans. In fact, the profession has largely been absent from the formation or advancement of such spaces. This is not a surprising reality given that traditional architectural structures were never designed with these programs and uses in mind. Furthermore, these actions often serve as an interface between “spatial fixity and powerful human and economic flows.” (Le Roux 2003:3). This is not to say that architects and planners have been completely absent in engaging these environments. There have been individual projects over the years that have done so. In the last decade, professional interest and/or involvement in the spaces of informal housing and markets have increased from Caracas to Johannesburg. These projects have had varying degrees of success. A variety of factors have contributed to this, but for the purposes of this paper, the focus will be on the complexity of the architectural aspect of engagement.

## THE WESTERN LENS

Given that many of the major cities in LDCs are strongly influenced by colonialism, the prevalence of Western architectural theory, and the supplanting of the primacy of Western cities by the emerging megacities of the LDCs, it is interesting to view how Western architects and planners have positioned themselves in this dialogue about informal space. The informal sector is not absent from Western society. Ad hoc street sellers on the sidewalks in New York City and Rome, a homeless encampment in Portland, Oregon and squatters in Paris, and guerrilla community gardens in Seattle and Toronto all represent informal occupations of space within the Western context. Furthermore, given the significant number of immigrants and migrants in the West (e.g. one in every five international migrant lives in the USA (UN Department of Social and Economic Affairs 2004)), additional informal activities such as day labour work, have become regular features of Western society. The most significant difference is that in the West there is a fairly strong and comprehensive formal institutional apparatus. The difference between that apparatus and the needs and aspirations of the majority of urban dwellers in Western cities, though far from negligible, pales in comparison to the scale of that difference in the cities of the LDCs.

In recent years, it has become in vogue for Western architects of note to cast an eye on the complex urban spatial dynamics of the LDCs. Rem Koolhaas tackled projects in China and Lagos through both his firm OMA and his research projects under the Harvard Project on the City. Herzog and De Mueron, along with Studio Basel, examined Nairobi, Kenya. And even Ghanaian born British architect David Adjaye has embarked on a multi-year examination of African capitals. It is important to note here that the emergence of interest in these cities is due to a variety of reasons, of which the increased primacy of these cities is but a part. These cities have also become of interest because of a shift in Western architectural thought that came about in the mid-late 1990's. Koolhaas was a major driver of the shift through written works such as ‘Whatever Happened to Urbanism?’ which first appeared in his book ‘S,M,L,XL’ (Koolhaas & Mau 1995). In that essay, Koolhaas argues that ‘the city’ no longer exists and that urbanism – as we know it – is dead. He further notes that if a ‘new urbanism’ is to succeed, then it must not be based on order and permanence, but on the ‘staging of uncertainty’. (Koolhaas & Mau 1995:971). Koolhaas’ short, but influential treatise captured the emergent disciplinary interest in the organization of flows, territories, events, and complexities as opposed to figures and objects. Instead of figure ground diagrams and orthographic projections, the new tools were secession matrices and scenario planning (Reiser, Schafer & Schafer 2008:5). It is not difficult to see how the visual dynamism of the informal sector would be so appealing a subject in this context.

Koolhaas’ project on Lagos not only epitomizes the aspirations of this philosophy, but also its shortcomings. The research project was part of a series entitled the Harvard Project on the City. The Project on the City was an ongoing graduate seminar at the Harvard Graduate School of Design, which pursued broad explorations of topics that Koolhaas felt to be particularly relevant to 21<sup>st</sup> century city. (In addition to Lagos, previous work from this group looked at shopping and the Pearl River Delta in China.) Koolhaas continued the research beyond the seminar, making multiple visits to Lagos in the succeeding years, participating in a variety of forums including the 2002 Documenta 11 Platform 4, and continuing to write about Lagos in publications such as ‘Mutations’, ‘Content’ and the forthcoming ‘Lagos: How it Works’.

To put Koolhaas’ interpretation in context, it is important to understand that Lagos, sub-Saharan Africa’s largest city, contains between 10-15 million inhabitants. Estimates project that by 2015, Lagos will have 23 million inhabitants, ranking third in the world (Packer 2006). Most of Lagos’ residents subsist through the informal

sector; informal exchanges make up 60 percent of all economic activity in the city (Packer 2006). Like many former colonial capitals, systemic planning for the city was at the scale of master plans that applied a Western hierarchy and belief system without regard to context. As urbanist AbdouMaliq Simone notes, planning was geared towards the creation of a 'dual city'. There are modern, or Western, parts of the city that house the organizational and managerial functions and serve as the link to the global capitalist flows. Although the African population is critical to the function of the city, they were situated in areas that subscribed to an "indigenous, pre-colonial economy." (Simone 2004:142). Such was the development of Lagos. And as if to underscore this duality, Western-educated architects and planners were often engaged to produce prestige projects that could attest to the city's role as a beacon of African modernity (Gandy 2005:44). In the mid-1960's, Lagos was the site of Africa's first skyscrapers. However, a civil war in the late 1960's, the collapse of oil wealth after the uncontrolled spending during the boom of the 1970's, political unrest and rampant and destructive corruption during the 1980's and 1990's and the collapse of the farming industry over this period of time decimated the country's infrastructures and institutions. The 'extreme poverty' figures for Nigeria as a whole rose from 28 percent in 1980 to 66 percent in 1996 (Gandy 2005:46). Lagos particularly felt the brunt of these events as its population doubled during those 16 years. As migrants from the rural areas descended upon the city with a dramatic speed and quantity, they arrived in a city that was ill-prepared to handle them. And so they often settled in substandard makeshift spaces such as the informal settlements on the "margins of railway tracks or highways, or in shacks precariously extended over the filthy canals, ditches and waterways." (Gandy 2005:46). Poverty exists at extreme levels and the apparatus of the state fails miserably to meet the needs of the vast majority of the city's residents. It is within this void that the informal sector has flourished.

This is the context within which Koolhaas and the Project on the City team arrived in Lagos. On the team's first visit, they only viewed the city from a car. This was partly out of fear (Koolhaas 2002:177). Whatever the reason, it probably contributed to the formation of this aestheticized view of the city: "At first sight, the city had an aura of apocalyptic violence; entire sections of it seemed to be smouldering, as if it were one gigantic rubbish dump." (Koolhaas 2002:177). On the second trip, they were able to venture from the cars long enough to see that the 'gigantic rubbish dump' was a highly constructed network that existed around sorting, recycling, and distributing the contents of the dump. A final trip with the research team consisted of an oft-cited ride in the presidential helicopter, which gave Koolhaas a view from which he could understand that

From the air, the apparently burning garbage heap turned out to be, in fact, a village, an urban phenomenon with a highly organized community living on its crust ... What seemed, at ground level, an accumulation of dysfunctional movements, seemed from above an impressive performance, evidence of how well Lagos might perform if it were the third largest city in the world. (Koolhaas 2002:177)

Koolhaas' commentary and the visual accompaniments that can be found in works such as 'Mutations' are a testament to the shift that he wrote about in that 1994 essay. Lagos is described as a signifier of urbanism yet to come. It is not trying to catch up to the cities of the West; rather it foretells the future of those cities. In 'Whatever Happened to Urbanism?', Koolhaas describes 'the urban' as 'out of control' (Koolhaas & Mau 1995:971), and it is clear that is what he and his team see in the extreme conditions of Lagos. But this place that Koolhaas has elevated as a bastion of this 'new urbanism' – like the extreme physical manifestations of modernism, Brasilia and Abuja – rely on a "grand narrative" (Reiser, Schafer & Schafer 2008:5). This grand narrative, though somewhat coherent at a larger scale, quickly devolves at the scale of the people who inhabit the cities. To view Lagos in the construct of a grand narrative keeps it in the realm of fascination, an object to behold but not to interact with. It is ironic given that the very critique laid against modern urbanism was the preoccupation with form. As Matthew Gandy notes in his provocative essay on the project, "To treat the city as a living art installation, or compare it to the neutral space of a research laboratory, is both to de-historicize and to depoliticize its experience" (Gandy 2005:42).

## ENGAGING INFORMAL SPACE

The way in which Koolhaas and his team repeatedly cast places and situations in Lagos as phenomena has a fundamental implication for the role of the architect and planner. In this vision of urbanism, there is little progress towards specificity in the way in which the city is analyzed or engaged as a context for practice. In fact, it might almost be construed as presenting an "abdication of design" (Reiser, Schafer & Schafer 2008:5). Recent articles challenging this abdication indicate that there is a disciplinary re-examination of this discourse as a dominant mode of thought.

It seems fitting to stay within Africa to find an alternate mode of practice, one in which the architect neither takes the top-down hierarchical approach often associated with modernism nor plays the role of casual yet fascinated

observer of the 'new urbanism'. It is what architect Hannah Le Roux once referred to as a "new outside category of spatial workers" that can engage "the very big, the very small, the landscaped, the urban, the political and the temporal" (Le Roux 2003:3).

Several of these alternative professionals and the projects in which they have engaged can be found in South Africa. This, in many respects, is an appropriate backdrop within which to seek these projects. In South Africa, apartheid was not only a political, social, and economic construct. It was a system that was fundamentally spatial. A variety of apartheid laws had directly spatial implications, with the most notable being the Pass and Influx Laws (regulated entry into the city from the Homelands, artificial nation-states established within the geographical boundaries of South Africa as the permanent homes for black South Africa) and the Group Areas Act (designated where each racial group was allowed to live within the city). In using these laws to restrict access to and within the urban areas, the apartheid regime ignored economic realities in pursuit of its ideological goals. The disparity between the rural homelands and the urban centres were stark; South African cities were sites of economic opportunities and as such, attracted migrants from the rural areas, both legal and illegal. Furthermore, there was a political dimension; the extremity of apartheid policies produced a very dualistic system in which the informal was a useful way of classifying that which appeared in opposition to the apartheid system (Ogbu 2003:4). Whether an economic or political act, informal activities had spatial implications.

Trade, transport, and shelter represent the leading informal activities in South Africa. There is a site in Durban that not only highlights the extreme spatial properties that such activities can have, but ways in which architecture and planning can work within that context to design a flexible, specific solution that can be an instrument for advancement. That site is Warwick Junction.

Warwick Junction is one of South Africa's busiest transport and commercial hubs. It represents the convergent point for the Berea Road Rail Station and Victoria Street Bus Terminus as well as numerous taxi ranks. Several urban freeways bisect the area and the N3 Eliat Viaduct passes overhead. The West Street Cemetery, Hazrath Badsha Peer (an Islamic saint) shrine, and the Victoria Street Market (also known as the Indian or Squatters' Market) are all located nearby. A Herb Traders' Market, which is one of the largest in the country, occupies several of the surrounding streets.

From an economic perspective, the informal economy of Warwick Junction is a significant force within the city. Approximately two-thirds of all informal traders in the city, some 7-8,000 people, are located in the area. As a result, Warwick Junction is estimated to have an annual turnover of somewhere between 750 million and 1 billion Rand. Informal trade flourished in the area in large part because of the significant concentration of vehicular and pedestrian flow. An estimated 450,000 people pass through the area daily and there are over 160,000 daily taxi departures.<sup>1</sup>

In order to understand the spatial significance of the economic and physical components and activities, it is important to understand the history of the area. Warwick Junction was originally a working class area, with a strong residential presence and a history of racial mixing. In the 1930's and 1940's, authorities tried – a largely unsuccessful effort – to move against the Indian property owners. Many white residents left the area in the 1950's. In the 1960's, came actions designed to help advance the ideas set forth in the Group Areas Act. Central Durban, like most major cities, was declared 'white only'. In order to help implement the law, cities like Durban appointed committees to help 're-plan' the city. The committee assessed placement of each racial group with deliberate consideration of things such as adjacencies, boundaries, and removals. The group that developed Durban's plan felt the need not only to separate the races, but also to set the plans in such a way as to avoid the large-scale movement of pedestrians of one race through the area of another. To that end, large infrastructural movements, such as the relocation of the railway station (primarily used by black Africans) from the city centre to the edge, were entirely justified. That new presence of the railroad station, a primary conduit for a particular population group into the city, helped set the stage for the complex social and economic dynamics that would occur in the area in ensuing decades.

After the fall of the apartheid regime in the 1990's, there was a huge influx of people to the city. This was caused by a variety of factors, from the newfound ability to gain access, conditions in the surrounding rural areas, and job losses in the formal sector (Grest 2001:9). This increase in population – and the movement associated with it – had a profound impact on the Warwick Junction area. Its location and existing physical and economic components (e.g. the railroad station and Victoria Street Market) provided a strategic hub for a variety of actors to engage in numerous types of economic, social, and political activities. These activities are not merely symbols of opportunistic availability, they often are mechanisms of survival. Whether a product of an apartheid state or a

1 Statistics from Dobson (2001).

globalized economy, a persistent cycle of poverty means that the movement and activities that came to define Warwick Junction were for most part linked to the most basic level of subsistence.

Never designed or maintained during the apartheid era to play this role, the physical space of the area declined under the weight of these pressures. The pavements and streets were congested, conflicts arose between groups vying for overlapping spaces, and safety was often tenuous. It is important to note here that the municipal council could have easily allowed the area to continue its evolution (or devolution) without any need for government action, particularly because many of the uses fell outside the boundaries of what was recognized as 'legal' activities. It is equally true that the municipal council could have sought to clean and repair the area through comprehensive eradication of the illegal activities. But the authorities instead chose to recognize the value that micro-economic function and intensive use of the public realm provided the city (Dobson 2006:4). The Council's actions moved towards establishing a program that provided regeneration while building upon the vibrancy and the social capital of the existing activities.

The overall project began with an initial investigation into the urban management challenge, pavement congestion, and the health and safety concerns surrounding the Herb Traders'/Healers' Market. Like many trading groups, the herb traders found the Warwick Junction area to be a highly advantageous market location. They principally resided on Russell and Leopold Streets, but also could be found in disperse pockets around the area. Because the quantity of goods used in the trade was such that it was impractical to move them on a daily basis, many of the traders (mostly women) lived on the sidewalks (Dobson 2006b:1). The presence of not merely a trading community, but also a residential one, represented a distinct additional level of occupation. This was a spatial consideration that had to be cognizant of in order to have a chance at being successful.

In 1992, officials from the municipal health department began to work with the traders, hoping to address in particular the health and safety concerns around a trade that figured prominently in the lives of many but was largely unregulated. A by-product of this engagement was the formation of a street committee, documentation of the traders' needs, and the creation of a Self Employed Women's Union. Although focused on health safety and education, the process that informed the department's work helped bring about an understanding of the larger relationships and activities that underpin the market. These findings in turn became instrumental to the work, particularly the infrastructural development, which was to follow. When the Warwick Junction Renewal Project<sup>2</sup> was eventually launched in 1996, the Herb Traders' Market was the first initiative undertaken.

The process to determine the location and configuration of the new market was a participatory one. On the ground consultations were held with the traders and buy-in was sought not only in the trading community but across relevant municipal departments and stakeholder groups. From an architectural perspective, the solution of a more 'formal' marketplace was complex. The history of the trade and the area, a scarcity of resources, and a need for survival had triggered creative adaptations that ultimately generated a vibrant – if physically problematic – trading environment. No 'formal' precedent existed. Furthermore, the dynamics of the relationships and activities were highly nuanced. To successfully engage, meant to understand elements like seasonal and kinship arrangements and 'sharing' of sites (Dobson 2006b:8). The ultimate physical implementation was initially designed to accommodate 700 workers and consisted of a series of open roofed stalls on Russell Street and on two incomplete freeway spurs. Also on the freeway spurs, were 12 semi-enclosed *iziyana* (traditional healers) kiosks and smaller open air trading spaces.

The use of the freeway spurs is significant, and an example of the spatial response serving not just a micro but also a macro need. The freeway spurs were incomplete acts of infrastructure leftover from the apartheid era. Like the other informal activities of the Warwick Junction area, the spurs were frequently the focus of opportunistic informal occupations, particularly residential. Municipal officials struggled to keep the occupations from becoming large and permanent. By inserting a physical intervention in that space, the project addressed a large urban management problem not through a wholesale clearance (which might have been more reminiscent of the apartheid state) but through the permanent activation of the site for a formerly 'marginal' activity. The larger urban strategy was also complemented by the installation of a pedestrian bridge that allowed for the physical integration of the market with the heart of Warwick Junction. Subsequent development of the market has also involved the spatial development of facilities related to the economic chain connected to this trade. An herb processing facility has been implemented as part of the project.

The project is not without its faults. The continual growth in traders means that there is pressure on the market to physically evolve to accommodate new traders. The residential provisions were never implemented due to

2 The creation of an urban regeneration and management process went through successive structures preceding and following the Warwick Junction Urban Renewal Project. Please refer to Grest (2002) for a more substantive description of this history.

difficulties with the municipal office in charge of it. Instead, an ability to lock up goods at night and a security patrol had to be accommodated. Phased development does propose to address some of the outstanding issues. Despite the issues, the economic impact of the implementation is clearly positive. In its first year of business (1998), the market had an annual turnover of 170 million Rand (Dobson 2006b:8). The traders were also generally happy with the process and the product. The physical and community success of the project also spurred on additional projects in the area that have addressed other trading groups.

The Warwick Junction Urban Renewal Project generated an even more successful economic – and key to this discussion spatial – structure than before. Architectural interventions constructed throughout the area, featured prominently in the regeneration project development. These new structures responded to the trade and transport needs either through the upgrading of existing structures or construction of new facilities. Included in this were the Herb Traders'/Healers' Market, the Early Morning Market (mainly a fruit and vegetable market), trading sites adjacent to the Hazrath Badsha Peer Shrine as well as on several nearby streets, and locations for Bovine Head and Mealie Cooking. In several of these projects, there is an aesthetic beauty that is rooted the language of the context (e.g., timber poles and corrugated metal). However, the success of these projects lay not only in the beauty of the physical structures created, but also in that the projects were fundamentally acts of responsive urbanism. Each architectural team had an understanding of the political, economic, and social context within which they were working. Rather than avoiding the complex issues, they challenged the designs to actively engage them. They worked closely with the urban management group and the group of traders. Each project was supposed to accommodate a participatory process in which the architecture was a combination of participation and expertise. One could say that the architects sought to enable strategies that nurtured “indigenous social networks and economies” (Wright 2005:81). They were able to successfully design and build creative structures that actively engage the informal activities they house without relegating them as subservient to the object.

Innovative structures such as the Herb Traders'/Healers' Market took into account the need for a space for trading, living, and storage. In the case of the Bovine Head and Mealie Cooking facilities, successful designs could not have been implemented without a clear understanding of the cooking process and the extended chain of activity connected with food sourcing, cooking, and waste disposal. The physical responses could not be rooted in a preconceived notion of a 'formal' facility. Instead, the tactics utilized by the traders informed the process. The result was not an eradication of those tactics, but an advancement of them. This remained true at the macro scale, where future proposed projects by iTrump, the urban management group that ultimately took over management and development of the area, reflected a responsive not prescriptive urban framework.<sup>3</sup>

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

As a demonstration of architectural engagement of the informal sector, the Warwick Junction Renewal Project is successful for four reasons. The first is that it recognizes the value (cultural, economic, and spatial) inherent in the existing context and it suggest that the best way to acknowledge this value is to engage the activity. Though often spatially compelling, to remain at the level of observation and fancy seems somewhat romantic and almost perverse, particularly when one realizes that this represents a minimum level of subsistence for a countless number of people. Architecture may not be the magical cure-all to solve urban dilemmas, but that does not mean that the profession should shirk its responsibility to participate in the process of the betterment of these environments. Wright (2005) tells us that design interventions can affect people's lives and momentarily efface boundaries between the real and the possible.

The second is that the design process was participatory and collaborative. The effort was not an act of architecture only. Rather the projects were products of the collective efforts of a larger team that included municipal agents, architects and planners, related NGOs, and the direct users. The latter were seen not only as the ultimate clients, but co-authors whose existing narrative was a critical piece of the projects. By engaging the clients and multiple stakeholders, the projects were rooted in a cross disciplinary approach that allowed the innovative urban scheme to break free from a meta narrative and instead consist of multiple narratives that together advanced the political, economic, and social opportunities of the individuals that converge on this space daily.

3 Recent events in Durban present a possible unfortunate footnote to the Warwick Junction Renewal Project. In March 2009, the city unveiled a plan to lease land in the Warwick Junction area to a private development group to build a mall. The mall would displace the Early Morning Market, including several hundred traders, and force the relocation of some other trading functions. Although the city and developer have promised that there will be some space set aside for traders in the new development, it is clear that the proposed plan owes more in heritage to the traditional modernist approach than the successful responsive approach pioneered to date. The traders, the local architectural community, and others have rallied in what hopefully will be a successful stand against the city.

Furthermore, the renewal project was rooted in a multiscalar approach. There was a clear understanding of each individual project at the micro scale (how specific design moves could be responsive to particular users and activities) and the macro scale (how the contiguous and overlapping systems and activities could negotiate within the spatial realm). In such a dense physical fabric, the ability to toggle between scales was key.

Finally, the various projects were not conceived as final or hierarchical acts. They were a part of a larger conversation about the evolution of the site with an understanding of its historical context as a backdrop and the current relationships and activities as the inspiration and guide. That conversation will continue to evolve long after their completion.

Fortunately, projects such as the Warwick Junction Renewal Project are not unique. Public Architecture's Day Labor Station project in the United States of America, Jorge Mario Jauregui Architects' Favela Bairro projects in Rio de Janeiro, and Alejandro Aravena's Elemental projects in Chile all demonstrate that there is the potential for this type of process and relevancy in a multitude of contexts.

The beginning of this paper suggested the notion of a productive framework with which architects and planners could view, analyze, and engage the complex spatial dynamics of the informal sector. To connect the dots, so to speak, between that proposal and the discussion that threads throughout the rest of the paper, it seems appropriate to reference two different but related thoughts. The first is from AbdouMaliq Simone who, in discussing the shifting identities prevalent in the informal sector at the local level, notes that "the critical challenge is how to recognize the identity of a single locality in many different localities" (Simone 2004:237). The second thought is from anthropologist Lisa Peattie, who has written extensively on the informal sector. She notes that when dealing with that realm, instead of broad generalizations, we should strive for "a repertoire of analytic concepts that helps us to understand similarities in process within diverse settings" (Peattie 1996:376). A productive framework exists at the interstice of these two thoughts. In order for architecture and planning to be able to successfully understand these dynamic and complex spatial environments, it must be rooted in an understanding of the larger issues that define these environments. Individual engagements – not interventions – spawned by this understanding can neither be monolithic and universal nor too abstract and open-ended. Instead, they must be charged with a specificity that is able to view and engage the larger issues through the lens of the local context. These spatial responses will not singlehandedly eliminate poverty nor turn illegal into legal, but they can have meaningful impact. By beginning to participate in the spatial negotiations around occupation across time, space, and society, architects and designers can more positively influence the ongoing redefinition of civic space.

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