Neighbourhoods in-formation:
Engaging with Local Construction Practices in Mumbai

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In this essay we explain why the phrase "neighbourhoods in-formation" does greater justice to settlements otherwise euphemistically called informal. These neighbourhoods have a higher level of agency and produce functional structures through local and extraneous factors that are often hidden behind their uneven and messy landscapes. Some aspects of this include mixed use localities, and overlapping of economic, civic and residential functions even at the level of individual structures. They are also sustainable by default, as they economize hugely on economic and material resources. Ignoring their potential produces policies and interventions that transform them into inert, zoned neighbourhoods, drained of economic energy and social dynamism. We describe our own interventions that build on the specific logic of such neighbourhoods and work with local actors employing a range of activities and partnerships. We make a case for developing these into a larger framework of official and professional protocol that will build on their ability to regenerate and improve themselves at various levels.

There is a marked tendency in social and natural sciences to dismiss phenomena, the functions of which cannot be identified, as useless and marginal. For instance, the portions of a genome for which no function is recognized are colloquially referred to as "junk DNA" by scientists, regardless of the fact that "junk" portions are far larger than those that are understood. Likewise academics, planners and policy makers call settlements that have not been planned as "slums", or more politically correctly "informal settlements". In Mumbai most people live in "slums" according to the latest census. From a purely quantitative point of view they constitute the norm rather than the exception, yet they are seen as irrational, marginal and deviant.

The phrase "informal settlements" evokes at best irregularity and at worst illegality. But more insidiously, it has the effect of classifying entire neighbourhoods as normatively undesirable and socially dysfunctional and therefore in need of urgent intervention. It places the onus of research and engagement on the formalization of these areas. This is usually achieved through forceful redevelopment projects that are supposed to bring formal logic to previously formless places.

Our work in different parts of the city that are labelled "slums" or "informal" shows that, quite on the contrary, these areas are characterized by a constant process of structuration, driven by local actors who incrementally develop and organize their neighbourhoods. We adapt Anthony Giddens concept of structuration that talks of the delicate, interactive way in which structure and agency reproduces social systems, into the space of urban settlements that also regenerate and reproduce themselves through a similar balance between extraneous and internal factors.

We agree with urban planner Ananya Roy, who remarks that informal settlements "are neither anomalous nor irrational; rather, they embody a distinctive form of rationality that underwrites a frontier of metropolitan expansion." (Roy, 2009: 86). Yet, we would like to push the argument a little further and argue that describing settlements as "informal" is counter-productive as it invisibilizes form-giving processes at work in unplanned areas.

We call neighbourhoods with a capacity to improve themselves over time as *neighbourhoods in-formation*. The term expresses the negentropic processes at work in the urban formation of unplanned (or rather locally planned) neighbourhoods. Sustainability is in our minds, not as much about mitigating entropy (conservation and durability) as much as about enabling form-giving dynamics. We believe that recognizing emergent forms and functions, and tolerating the absence of form where it cannot be recognized, are integral aspects of achieving higher sustainability. The concept of *neighbourhoods in-formation* also explicitly refers to the rich notion of "information". The aspect of information that we would like to emphasize here is its production, which necessarily implies a relationship between the emitter and receiver. Sociologist Laurent Thénévot reminds us that "Information comes from 'inform' which originally meant give form to – 'enformer' in Old French, 'enforme' in Middle English." (Thénévot, 2007). By giving form one allows experiences to be communicated, discussed and engaged with. Giving form is a creative act, which forces researchers to position themselves vis-à-vis the object of their study.

The complexity of local development processes, which merge construction practices with economic activity and social networks mean that the physical and the non-physical cannot be neatly dissociated. Thus the "forms" we observe never belong to just one realm. They are rather non-finite assemblages of people, things, relations and institutions. What we decide to recognize as a form and what we ignore is necessarily related to a certain project or vision.

The informal settlement narrative is typically instrumentalized by proponents of redevelopment and motivated by the will to control space or speculate on its value. In Mumbai, this vision has produced a landscape of high-rise buildings and heavy transportation infrastructure dominated by top-heavy urban development practices, which reduces local agency in urban formation to its minimal level.

The *in-formation* counter-narrative that we are proposing sees values in the generation of urban, social and economic forms by local actors, and defends the idea that along with cultural diversity and cosmopolitanism, cities should celebrate the variety of their habitats.

Our work with small builders in Shivaji Nagar (Deonar), Dharavi, Bhandup and other parts of the city is based on an engagement with neighbourhood life. Whether it is design studios organized with local schools, design work with architects or participatory planning workshops, our interventions rely on the recognition of existing organizational patterns rather than the imposition of ready-made ideas or "solutions". In the collaboration itself, new forms and ideas emerge that have transformative potential.

Most people in neighbourhoods notified as slum areas do not have legal tenure of their homes, yet after occupying their homes for two or more generations, they develop a sense of entitlement, which is reinforced by the presence of political parties that partially protect their occupancy rights. Over time, residents invest in their homes and businesses, improving their structures, building higher and better. Slum dwellers often leverage their homes to generate income, by building an extra floor and rent it out to relatives or newcomers. Most neighbourhoods are mixed use, and a large number of residents use their homes as workspaces.

The construction of houses is done by a web of local owners, contractors, labourers, carpenters, electricians, plumbers, and material providers. Their structures are built locally in a "vernacular" style. However, they are made with industrial products such as bricks, corrugated sheets, cement, steel pipes and I-beams. These products are bought at market prices from hardware and material stores that are located in the neighbourhood itself. As any middle-class homeowner would do, homeowners and contractors in these neighbourhoods often choose high-quality materials over low-cost ones. An investment in quality is justified if it means enhanced use-value in the form of higher living standards or in improving the income generating capacity of the structure.

We see *neighbourhoods in-formation* as having an internal energy and an ability to harness resources – both people and materials – and provide a template for those interested in environmentally and socially sustainable urban practices. This is primarily because of their specific economic capabilities that use a range of different sources; from tradable physical labour, community resources to local credit, all of which are based on economizing space and cost and enhancing use value by making the space functional at various levels – in economic as well as residential terms.

In contrast, dominant economic arrangements and urban planning today encourage wasteful forms, using speculation as fuel, and work on a different scale and logic. The value of real estate is now completely dissociated from the use of space and is mostly based on anticipated future returns. This sees the emergence of a particular kind of urban landscape, over built, segregated, often with many swathes of vacant spaces and – by itself – not economically dynamic. Within such a context, many ecologically sustainable buildings often do get made – but their overall impact on the environment, either in positive or negative terms, remains rather inert. In contrast, when urban forms encourage intensive use, increase value of land through multiplying use across sectors and functions, they work on a different economic logic, with a different set of actors. These need to be seen as sustainable practices too – in a manner that goes beyond the question of material use alone.

For us the question of sustainable urban practices has to include the overall arrangement and context it is a part of. Along with neighbourhoods in-formation being economically dynamic and relatively independent, we also see them as being very resourceful and controlled in terms of overall consumption of materials. Unfortunately these neighbourhoods and their practices are all lumped together as part of urban problems that need to be solved.

Subsequently, urban housing issues are addressed in very limited ways. Public planners and private developers have mostly sought to resolve them through interventions, which have, by and large, resulted in poor quality construction and an inability to connect with the local scale. Non-state actors (both profit driven and charitable) have entered the market for the provision of what is termed as affordable housing for the urban poor. The government is now actively encouraging market driven interventions that cross-subsidize the construction of affordable housing stock. In the process, the dynamism inherent in these neighbourhoods, their potential and abilities, all get undervalued. Instead of improving their infrastructure, building on their multiple economic capacities, their form itself is destroyed and flattened out, through a

mind-set that zones functions and reduces habitats to mono-functional residential units. This is mainly done to release land for market friendly real estate development, a market that is hostile to older mixed-use forms and heterogeneous habitats.

The Slum Rehabilitation Scheme in Mumbai is an example of this approach where land is released from erstwhile occupied lands in officially designated "slums" through relocating the residents in vertical structures, while providing valuable "transferable building rights" to developers. In other cities developers are directly purchasing cheap land wherever possible and targeting new buyers from the lower middle-class sector who were so far unable to afford housing at market rates. There housing is made affordable by lowering construction costs, minimizing the footprint of individual units and scaling up the size of construction projects. The result is a real estate "product" with rapidly degrading value that is bought and sold speculatively by a middle-class looking for affordable property investment, rather than affordable living spaces. The proverbial "bottom of the pyramid" section of the population, which is in theory the target group of affordable housing schemes, rarely benefits.

Yet, expectations are still far from being met, both in terms of quantity and quality of affordable housing. The housing shortage in India is estimated to be about 25 million units and that number is expected to rise to 30 million by 2020 (Jones Lang LaSalle, 2011). The logic that consists in making housing affordable by reducing the cost of construction has led to all kinds of malpractices. After a few years in existence, affordable housing blocks typically start crumbling down, leading to rising maintenance costs and lowering real estate value. Very soon they look worse than what they were meant to replace, and seem ready to be redeveloped themselves.

This provokes us to discuss new ways of conceiving, producing, financing and designing affordable housing by encouraging us to recognize the ability of many neighbourhoods to produce their own stock. From this perspective, the so-called slums of the city are seen as direct attempts at increasing units through a different construction and financial system. Of course the argument is faced with many challenges – legal, political and economic – but also issues about design, the history of urban planning, twentieth century visions of modern cities and other rarely discussed issues that are pertinent to a critical and effective policy and practice about affordable housing.

We draw on a long history of practices and policies, evolved mostly in South America, which recognize the ability of people themselves to come out with the best housing and habitat solutions. These have been picked up by states and global organizations like the World Bank as well, expressed in many successful but aborted sites and services schemes. In the context of Asia, we recognize the closer, almost overlapping relations that habitats have with economic functions, with the effective collapse of spaces such as the bazaar and living spaces, the shop-house and what we refer to as the "tool-house". Instead of seeing them as a part of the informal world, we point out their kinship with some urban experiences in developed Asian contexts like Tokyo. Similar typologies and urban forms spread all across Asia and can be seen even in settlements referred to as slums.

Our attempt has been to evolve an approach that transforms these existing impulses into a viable model for addressing economic and residential problems of the urban poor in megacities such as Mumbai. We use this as a starting point to develop an approach to urban practice that brings together corporate, local economic actors, governments, professionals such as architects and urban planners and residents.

Given the scale of the need, the paucity of resources at one level and the abundance of investment available at another and most importantly, the successful ways in which people have evolved solutions, we feel such coordinated action is well worth pushing through on a more accelerated pace to address an issue that is perceived to be a monster one for this century, in this part of the world.

We have developed networks with local builders and masons in settlements in Mumbai and documented their practices. We have found that many of them produce good quality affordable housing at cost that cannot be competed with by any large or institutional actor. The relationship between builders and their clients, based on community and friendship networks is what ensures the respect of oral contracts and the quality of the work. We are currently collaborating with professional architects and local builders in neighbourhoods officially sanctioned as slum areas and co-creating new designs and construction techniques. We have also started providing high-quality construction materials in small quantities in places that have traditionally been redlined by high-end suppliers. In the process, we learn as much as the local actors and get involved with projects in ways that are not available in highly regulated and standardized development practices in other parts of the city.

Infrastructure improvement, collection of rent and recognizing mixed use of space for economic and residential functions as fundamentals for habitat and socio economic improvement are all existing strategies done under cover of existing local neighbourhood level political patronage. These are often at odds with the local municipal authorities, who, on their part have oscillated between tolerance and intolerance of these strategies based on arbitrary choices and uncertain political responses of the state at a higher level.

If we can simply follow the logic of what is already happening, reflected in the political unfolding of civic life in the city and encourage its bureaucratic and institutional structures to be more responsive, just as we are encouraging professionals, urban practitioners and even some corporate groups to do so, we will be able to produce a city with better quality infrastructure, economic life and an inclusive ethos for all its citizens. The logic of *neighbourhoods in-formation* needs to be channelled and supported politically, through practice and institutional mechanism for this to happen.

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