(In)formal Pattern Language
Designing processes for informal settlements, Cairo, Egypt

Main author
Nada Nafeh, architect, The American University in Cairo, Egypt

Project data
Project group: Landscape, urban design, transportation infrastructure and public utilities
Client: Informal Communities
Project background: Research project

Summary and appraisal of the project by the jury
Revisiting and expanding upon Christopher Alexander’s “Pattern Language,” a method is being proposed to improve living conditions in Cairo’s informal settlements. Designing processes for informal settlements in Cairo, Egypt, can be understood as cooperation between individuals from different backgrounds, motivations, and participation in informal communities. In certain neighborhoods, but one that could also be easily transferred to similar sites in Cairo. Of specific interest is the proposed relation between daily activities and the architectural framework that determines the spaces that people inhabit – the intersection, as it were, between habits and habitat. While the emphasis on processes was greatly appreciated, the jury nonetheless would like to encourage the author to be equally inventive when engaging in the design of architecture, rather than relying on established prototypical architectural “patterns,” to so speak.

Statements on the sustainability of the project by the author
Progress: Reframing the informal and the role of user and architect through Improvitecture
The proposed model mediates between bottom-up efforts and top-down expertise in an open, replicable and transferable way. Expanding architectural practice, the proposed Improvitecture model that revolves about discovering and optimizing the potentials of self-organized processes and patterns. It redefines the informal as improvised and transforms citizens into active agents and the architect into a mediator and choreographer of forces. The initiative implies that architects should, in addition to the traditional profile, design the process and replicable tools that empower people to take ownership. It provides a way for architects to insert themselves both as agents and participants in informal communities, a duality allowing them to operate with, for and against a cause. People: Social inclusion at all stages of the project
Advocating for social and ethical responsibility, the project engages individuals from different backgrounds throughout its life cycle, from mapping patterns to improve living conditions in Cairo’s informal settlements. Particularly valued was the notion of an “(in)formal pattern language” that could guide users in improving their environment, a “language” that would not only allow people to take ownership of their specific neighborhood, but one that could also be easily transferred to similar sites in Cairo. Of specific interest is the proposed relation between daily activities and the architectural framework that determines the spaces that people inhabit – the intersection, as it were, between habits and habitat. While the emphasis on processes was greatly appreciated, the jury nonetheless would like to encourage the author to be equally inventive when engaging in the design of architecture, rather than relying on established prototypical architectural “patterns,” to so speak.

Next Generation 3rd prize 2017
Middle East Africa

LafargeHolcim Awards
The world’s most significant competition in sustainable design.

Image 1: Improvitecture optimizes existing conditions through urban acupuncture without destroying self-organized socio-cultural and economical networks and patterns. Tools and proposals use the same tactics of the (in)formal like compactness, incompleteness, hyperfunctionality, urban layering and resource centrality, to re-appropriate and blend with the built environment.


Image 3: Design proposal and optimization for urban voids.

Image 4: Image of community walls.

Image 5: Optimizations of urban voids through “Community Walls”.

Image 6: Optimizations of urban voids through “Community Walls”.

Image 7: Optimizations of urban voids through “Community Walls”.

Image 8: Optimization of urban voids through “Community Walls”.

Image 9: Image of community walls.

Image 10: Image of community walls.

Image 11: Image of community walls.