WHAT LIES BENEATH

UCL Space Syntax PhD Candidate Fani Kostourou considers what we may learn from digging deeper into what architects could call failure, highlighting six qualities of informal paths which she argues are worth integrating in formal planning.
It is becoming clearer than ever that slums constitute an integral counterpart of contemporary cities. Most of the time they are portrayed as inappropriate and perhaps chaotic settings lacking structure and basic infrastructure; desperate for drastic solutions. Otherwise, they are opaque urban zones, spaces of closeness and creativity. Instead of clearing, disregarding or re-inventing them, we as architects and planners can further investigate what most people would call 'failure'. That is to say, there is still room for learning from what isn't obvious to the naked eye.

Looking at the Brazilian favelas, some hidden qualities are brought into the fore. Qualities that not only reveal a greater virtue of urban informality—that of adaptation to specific conditions— but also are worth integrating to formal planning. In fact, Eduardo Paes, mayor of Rio de Janeiro, in his TED Talk has claimed that "favelas are not always a problem...[but] can sometimes really be a solution". Of course, there is a risk of cliché when talking about 'learning from favelas', that of romanticising. But the pure scope here is to document the ingenuity involved in the furnishing of this world with a 'naïveté' that Georges Perec would approve of. By actually being present and witnessing, we can acknowledge an unconscious bottom-up 'intelligence', the Brazilian 'ginga' of urban space. Let's observe for example an informal street/path, one of the five elements of cities.
Spatial Quality III: Walking Pattern

Despite its prima facie complexity, there are distinctive intermediate sub-destinations along the route such as the football field, working as check points, improving its walking. The further the walker goes, the more, he can see around the corner. If he keeps on walking and the intermediate destination keep changing, then the movement seems like a 'missile tracking a moving target'.

Spatial Quality III: Conspicuity

Even though it is difficult to mentally map the path, eventually, it is not so hard to gain its expression. People always have the feeling of moving along the revel's unique pathway like a slipper path. Since there are no obvious alternative trails, the sense of navigation becomes conspicuous of a contentious urban 'escape' running through the community.

Spatial Quality IV: Scale

The extreme in narrowness usually force the pedestrians to walk behind one another in rails, but instead of serious discontentment it can unconsciously provoke sentiments of intimacy, enabling 'rubbing shoulders'.

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Spatial Quality V: Conviviality

Everyone is using the street as a place to see, hear and meet people hanging out or in a place to be seen, and this opportunity works as an element of invitation or attraction for them.

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As Perec wrote in 1974: "The street: try to describe the street, what it’s made of, what it’s used for...Detect a rhythm...Decipher a bit of town...The people in the streets: where are they coming from? Where are they going to? Who are they?"

While walking through Cantagalo favela along the hillside of Morro do Pavilão in Rio de Janeiro, one sees that the main path may not look like formal streets or one of Jacobs’ great streets. However it serves the exact same purpose: traffic conduit, infrastructure line, common space for access to private property, place of social and commercial encounter and exchange, public showcase, and political space. Through a complete random aggregation of elements the path managed to embrace at the same time all the functions and speeds taking place in the favela. Even more, we believe it disposes six specific spatial qualities that offer a direct interest for design: direction, conspicuousness, walking pattern, conviviality, scale and comfort.

Similar to other informal paths, Cantagalo’s main street is a veritable stage of gathering where inhabitants feel comfortable spending most of their day. It encourages them to appropriate it making it a working counterexample for the planned streets of the Brazilian ‘condominios fechados’ and MCMV settlements. The favela of Cantagalo is by no means perfect, nor is its main street; nonetheless it succeeds in retaining the gullelfulness found in the everyday life of ‘favelados’; a guile that creates and transforms possibilities in space.

2. In the architectural discourse, learning from informality is not a novelty but dates back from 1960's John FC Turner's writings and it has been constantly growing as a fashion since then.
5. Favelas, Learning From, Lotus 143. 2010.
7. Ginge basically means absolute bliss or happiness. The Portuguese word conjures up an almost dance-like way of running. It’s swinging your body from one side to the other to decoire. It’s the happiness found in Brazilian football players and the Brazilians from the lower classes who are often more generous, happier and more willing to try new things. It is the rhythm of the place.
11. Oated communikas
12. In 2009, Brazil launched ‘Minha Casa, Minha Vida’ ("My House, My Life") mass housing programme in order to face a 54 million housing deficit.
15. Favela inhabitants