FROM PRODUCT TO PROCESS
BUILDING ON URBAN-THINK TANK’S APPROACH TO THE INFORMAL CITY

Adriana Navarro-Sertich interviews a pioneer of the informal in architecture, co-founder and co-director of Urban-Think Tank (U-TT) Alfredo Brillembourg. Brillembourg explains how U-TT’s work seeks to connect informal settlements with the formal city, enabling inhabitants to access services and infrastructure. U-TT is now taking the lessons it has learnt in working in Latin American cities, such as Caracas and São Paulo, elsewhere in the world with the aim of ‘working globally and acting locally’. 
Social and cultural responsibility is returning to the forefront of contemporary architecture. We are now witnessing spectacular libraries in depressed neighbourhoods, cable-car systems in marginalised areas and museums in informal settlements. Through interventions that acknowledge and legitimise the potentials of urban informality, designers have begun to adopt the ‘informal city’ as a new paradigm. Alongside the increasing traction of this paradigm, analyses of key issues and questions, as well as short- and long-term outcomes of such interventions, are critical. One pioneer in this field is co-founder and co-director of Urban-Think Tank (U-TT) Alfredo Brillembourg. Starting out as an NGO (Caracas Think Tank) conducting research in the barrios (informal settlements) of Caracas, founders Brillembourg (a Venezuelan architect educated at Columbia University) and Hubert Klumpner (an Austrian architect also educated at Columbia) soon started making proposals for the city, in the process transforming their practice into the architecture firm Urban-Think Tank in 1998. With work including a series of Vertical Gymnasiums, the first of which was constructed in 2004 in Bello Campo (Caracas), the Metro Cable in Caracas (2010), the FAVA autistic children’s school and the community centre proposal for Paraisópolis (São Paulo) projected for 2012, they view themselves as ‘contemporary architects working in conflict zones’. Although many of these interventions are relatively new, exploring the approach, methodology and impact is essential to further both the discourse and practice.

Brillembourg began by explaining that U-TT’s projects seek to ‘connect the formal and informal city’. The main objective is to give the inhabitants of the local communities better accessibility and services, and to bring some of the infrastructure from the formal city into the informal city.

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of solutions. For example, for transportation and infrastructure, U-TT suggests decentralised public service systems, modular stairs and cable-car systems; or for the socioeconomic wellbeing of dwellers, encourages sustainable development, urban agriculture, prefabrication and modular design. Working in what he terms ‘territories of speed and need’, Brillembourg clarifies that U-TT creates a framework, hands it over to municipalities, and welcomes re-adaptations from local communities. ‘We don’t pretend to control the project up to the last screw,’ he affirms.

The idea of establishing best practices highlights the importance of transferring knowledge and supporting transnational analyses in research and urban practice. It also raises questions about the transferability of projects. When asked about the differences and similarities in U-TT’s approach to the multiple projects and contexts, Brillembourg says: ‘We try to start our projects from an ethical position, but there are different cultural frameworks depending on the context … Culture greatly modifies what type of technology or design we attempt to make. Generally, we engage the community profoundly in discussions and meetings, and we bring this community development practice to each place, though often with different methods of implementation.’

Declaring that ‘the idea of transferring knowledge from the comfortable distance of a New York office is a big problem’, Brillembourg stresses the importance of being on the ground and engaging with the social, political and economic aspects of the local community. For this reason, U-TT has established offices in Caracas, New York, São Paulo and Zürich. He adds: ‘Architecture is much more interesting if you attack it from the grass-roots community perspective because sustainability really means focusing on the user and his or her connection to a building. Thus it is not about the formal aspects, but about the way it works, the programme.’

Cultural specificities, in addition to the politics of place with its particular socioeconomic dynamics, set up very different conditions and value systems that are embedded within the urban fabric. Although physical challenges might be similar from place to place, the manner in which these challenges are addressed needs to be very specific to the context. Will projects be received and used in the same manner in different areas and situations? When we speak of use, we also speak of associated socioeconomic outcomes. For example, will the impact of a metro cable in Caracas or Medellín be the same in other places? Can projects in São Paulo’s favelas be relevant solutions for Johannesburg’s townships?

Contingent on this, in speaking about ‘connecting the informal to the formal’, we need to understand that the informal city is not disconnected from the formal city. Quite the opposite: informality is not a product but a process, constantly in the making, shifting and redefining relationships.
with the formal. As such, when considering the informal, we need to acknowledge multiple dynamics, including income levels and employment, the value of real-estate, tenure and legality. By looking at informality as a product, or as merely an issue of form and morphological conditions, physical design interventions ignore critical factors related to the process. The importance of linking design to policy is testimony to the significance of these factors.

One of the biggest obstacles for many of the practices and projects dealing with informality is a failure to integrate with the policies of government agencies. When asked his opinion on the latter, Brillembourg replied that a large amount of U-TT’s time and attention is dedicated to engaging cities’ mayors within the process and communicating the power of design in bringing visibility and awareness: ‘The engineering of practical quick fixes is necessary, but if innovative design is not integrated then we lose the opportunity to create a sense of pride. If there is no pride, the community won’t feel integrated with the building, and over time the project loses its potential and gets sucked back into the informal fabric.’

Moreover, reinforcing the idea of best practices, Brillembourg affirms that the purpose of ‘paring back architecture to its elements, and making it simple and repeatable,’ is to convince mayors, who are only in office for three to five years, to implement a project. ‘The only way that you can convince them is if they can cut a ribbon, because they are looking for political capital,’ he explains.

In addition to getting politicians onside is the need to directly engage with city policy and planning. For these projects to be effective, they need to be part of the larger city plan, thereby becoming integral to strategies of social inclusion, mobility, security and environmental protection. They will become instrumental in restitching the city, providing the necessary opportunities for economic growth and sustainable development. Currently, some of the more striking interventions have been manifestations of continuous and integral government policies and planning strategies, with some private-sector support. Clear examples are Medellín’s Social Urbanism, Guayaquil’s Malecón 2000 urban regeneration projects, or Rio de Janeiro’s well-known Favela-Barrio programme.

In contrast, the delicate political climate and centralised government structure in U-TT’s home country, Venezuela, have impeded the implementation of similar strategies there, with the result that the 1990s Physical Habilitation of the Barrios Program culminated in punctuated and disconnected projects.

Despite the difficulties in Venezuela, U-TT continues to look for new ways of reconfiguring the city, pushing for experimentation and redefining the role of the architect: ‘Hubert and I identify with the role of film producers, activists or even social entrepreneurs. We attempt to put together communities, design ideas and urban actors on the ground who are the
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below right: Transportation systems, such as the metro cable in San Agustín, have the possibility of becoming a catalyst for urban and social change if they are well integrated with the transportation infrastructure of the city and are accompanied by programmes focusing on socioeconomic factors.

San Agustín’s cable-car system is so new that its real impact and sustainability are yet to be seen. The painted houses using the colours of the Venezuelan flag – yellow, blue and red – are the work of the Misión Tricolor, the national initiative for barrio development.
stakeholders in order to produce high-quality architecture … We look at bringing together different people, different disciplines and coming up with new products.’

In this experimentation, it is also critical to look to the past. An important lesson learnt from previous projects, practitioners and theorists is that we cannot de-politicise the question of informality, solely focusing on packages of physical transformations. As practices like U-TT reflect, dependence on time and space makes the concept of best practices obsolete if it is disengaged from a more holistic approach which engages the local community, and acknowledges internal hierarchies, cultures, values, race, gender, local aesthetics and functional standards, as well as working directly with sociologists and anthropologists, and becoming more ethnographic in its approach.

‘This is the paradoxical problem of today’s designers – how to address contemporary crises with future-oriented solutions. But unlike the paradigms of last century’s architects, we must not seek one solitary answer to our complex problems. Instead we must embrace the idea that good products and processes will only arise when the discourse that births them consists of both words and actions.’

In the world of the informal city, where choices are limited and informality is sometimes the only option for survival or resistance, these interventions and design-centred approaches are opportunities for the local people to gain recognition and to claim their rights to the city. As we continue to follow and perhaps mirror work such as that of U-TT, we need to understand and evaluate the impact and use value of our strategies and interventions to avoid falling into the trap of adopting an image of social good instead of addressing the social and economic realities of everyday life.

Notes
3. To give some background on the examples cited: Medellin’s Social Urbanism, part of former mayor Fajardo’s ‘Medellin la más educada’ (Medellin the most educated), has resulted in an extensive network of libraries and public spaces (proyectos urbanos integrales) in depressed areas of the city. Guayaquil’s urban regeneration projects, such as Las Peñas and El Malecón Salado, are part of a larger beautification scheme for the city that began with the downtown waterfront renovation project, Malecón 2000. The interventions are designed, constructed and maintained by a private organisation that works directly with the municipality, the Fundación Malecón 2000. Finally, Rio de Janeiro’s Favela-Barrio programme, with the financial support of the IDB, focused on infrastructure and public space interventions in medium-sized favelas. Today, through the national PAC, or Growth Acceleration Programme, a similar strategy to the Favela-Barrio is being implemented in Rio’s larger favelas.

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