

Informality in the New Urban Agenda: A “New Paradigm?”

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Abstract

The New Urban Agenda, the outcome document of the United Nations Habitat III conference in 2016, was adopted by consensus by all 193 member states of the United Nations. The Habitat III leadership has proclaimed that the document represents a “new paradigm” in urban planning, reversing the “over-determined” model of 20th century Western-dominated planning, and embracing more locally-determined forms of informality. This paper examines the intellectual history of the document, and compares it to its antecedents, thereby evaluating the claim that it represents a new paradigm. The conclusion assesses implications for future planning practice, particularly as we confront an age of rapid urbanization in many parts of the globe.

Keywords: Informality, Self-organization, Social Production, New Urban Agenda, Charter of Athens

Introduction

In October 2016, the third United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development—more commonly known as “Habitat III”—was held in Quito, Ecuador. Its outcome document, the “New Urban Agenda,” outlined a new framework agreement for urbanization policy and practice over the next two decades (United Nations 2017). In December of that year, all 193 UN member states adopted by consensus the New Urban Agenda, thereby implicitly agreeing (though without any binding requirements) to adopt its policies on urban development.

The New Urban Agenda comes at a time of unprecedented rapid urbanization in many parts of the world, especially the Global South (UN-DESA 2018). At the same time, there is an increased recognition of the “informal” aspects of global urban development, including informal settlements (discussed sixteen times in the document) as well as informal economies (discussed four times in the document). Claims have also been made by prominent contributors to the Habitat III process, as discussed further below, that the document represents a “paradigm shift” away from Western-dominated models of “over-determined” urbanism and “towards a more open, malleable, and incremental urbanism that recognizes the role of space and place—and how they are shaped by planning and design—in making cities more equitable” (Clos et al. 2018, 3).

This paper examines what the New Urban Agenda reveals about the current state of discourse on urban informality, and the degree to which this new international pol-

icy agreement reflects a historic change in direction for urban development policy—a “new paradigm”—as claimed. The conclusion assesses the implications for planning for the future, and the challenges remaining to implement the goals and policies of the New Urban Agenda.

Intellectual Antecedents of the New Urban Agenda

The New Urban Agenda was developed over a multi-year process involving a complex progression of events, issue papers, engagement activities, and online dialogues between governments, civil society and other stakeholder groups (Habitat3.org 2016). A series of “preparatory committees” met to draft portions of the document, and these were debated and amended by member states and other stakeholders.

The intellectual content of the Agenda’s language, however, was contributed through a series of conferences and related issue papers. One of these kinds of events was known as an “Urban Thinkers Campus.” A representative Urban Thinkers Campus was organized as a partnership among UN-Habitat, Project for Public Spaces, and Ax:son Johnson Foundation, and held in Stockholm, Sweden in 2015. This partnership, known as the “Future of Places,” was a multi-stakeholder initiative that brought together over 500 organizations and more than 1500 individuals from around the world, including significant representation from the Global South (UN-Habitat 2015).

Two of the participants at the Future of Places conference were the sociologists Richard Sennett and Saskia Sassen. They are co-authors of the book, *Toward an Open City: The Quito Papers and the New Urban Agenda* (2017), which offers a detailed exposition of the thinking behind the New Urban Agenda. Additional co-authors include Joan Clos, secretary general of Habitat III, and Ricky Burdett, professor of Urban Studies at the London School of Economics. Also participating in the conference was Maimunah Mohd Sharif, then mayor of Penang Island, Malaysia and later the successor to Joan Clos as executive director of UN-Habitat. The interaction between Sennett, Sassen, and other prominent figures in this conference provides an indication of at least one influential strain of the intellectual content of the New Urban Agenda (Future of Places 2016).

In turn, Sennett, Sassen, and the others drew on more recent intellectual influences in the later 20th Century, including criticisms of Western-led global development trends and their consequences (Sassen 2014). The conference also featured extensive discussion of growing challenges for the Global South, including rapid urbanization, informal settlements, loss of affordability and homelessness, gentrification, displacement, and challenges to the “right to the city” (Future of Places 2016).

For his part, Sennett argued that “we need to apply ideas about open systems currently animating the sciences to animate our understanding of the city” (Sennett 2018a). His “open city” drew on ideas of informal interaction described much earlier by Jane Jacobs (1961) in her powerful critique of the early 20th century architect Le Corbusier’s conception of cities. “Against the over-determined vision of Le Corbusier,”

wrote Sennett, “Jacobs argued that places should become both dense and diverse, either in the form of dense streets or packed squares; such physical conditions can prompt the unexpected encounter, the chance discovery, the innovation which is the genius loci of cities” (Sennett 2018, 7).

Soon after Jacobs, the architect and design theorist Christopher Alexander—also discussed by Sennett—articulated a specific design problem: the tendency to organize designs into neatly ordered hierarchical structures, or mathematical “trees.” A city is not a “tree,” as Alexander argued in a famous 1965 paper with the same title. It is, rather, a web-network of overlapping and ambiguous relationships. This is not a weakness, Alexander wrote, but a critical strength of cities:

It must be emphasized, lest the orderly mind shrink in horror from anything that is not clearly articulated and categorized in tree form, that the idea of overlap, ambiguity, multiplicity of aspect and the semi-lattice are not less orderly than the rigid tree, but more so. They represent a thicker, tougher, more subtle and more complex view of structure. (2015, 16)

Alexander’s paper critiqued a number of mid-century global developments and their dramatic failures, including sites in Chandigarh, India and Brasilia, Brazil. He traced their failure to become vital urban places to their failure to generate “multiplicity of aspect,” ambiguity and complexity. The “tree city” was a rigid top-down imposition by planners, notably Western planners, on the life and complexity of real places, with devastating results.

In his focus on the implications for designers, Alexander’s view seems more in sympathy with Sennett’s than does Jacobs’s. As Sennett said, “Urban design, as design, does not figure much in [Jacobs’s] version of the open city; the art of design matters in mine” (Sennett 2018). This is not a laissez-faire conception of urbanization, then, but one of a different kind of design.

It is this focus on design and planning, as acts that must consciously engage informality, that is perhaps most striking within the New Urban Agenda. Design is not simply a matter of creating end states—the view that seems to be implied in the Charter of Athens—but rather, of creating the conditions under which urban structures may evolve in directions that are more preferred for their residents.

In this respect, Sennett is echoing the influential design theorist and polymath Herbert Simon, who famously described design as a process of “changing existing conditions into preferred ones” (Simon, 1988). This view of design is in stark contrast with the over-determined *tabula rasa* approach of the Charter of Athens.

Simon also pioneered describing the implications of the dawning age of complexity for design, notably in a famous paper on “The Architecture of Complexity” (Simon 1962). Like Alexander, he noted that the structures treated by design are *nearly* decomposable hierarchies, but not necessarily so. Indeed, Simon saw clearly that the structures of the cybernetic age were “generative”—that is, they might proceed from a few simple rules that could produce considerable complexity as they interact within an

environment over time. The same principle holds, he observed, for human beings: Our own complex behaviors result from complex interactions with our environments and with one another, notably in an urban setting.

Simon also cautioned against over-planning too far in advance. Human beings are unable to anticipate all of the conditions that will occur because they are limited by what he termed “bounded rationality.” This term referred to what he called “important constraints arising from the limitations on the actor himself as an information processor”—that is, our inability to know in advance all of the complex variables that will interact and determine a result (ibid., 162). An obvious example is the inability to precisely predict, say, the weather at a particular time next week.

For designers, this implies that the “over-determined city” described by Sennett and the “tree city” described by Alexander must be avoided. What is needed instead is a kind of planning that is more iterative; one that is more able to adjust and change paths to make the necessary transformation toward preferred conditions possible. Moreover, this is a kind of planning that creates a supportive framework within which the preferred changes may, with careful transformation, develop over time.

Sennett may also be reflecting the acknowledged influence of sociologist Bruno Latour (2005), whose “actor network theory” sees a shifting web of relationships in urban settings, and not a rigid “determined” structure. There is also a strong echo of Henri Lefevbre’s (1992) “social production of space” (also explicitly referenced in the New Urban Agenda) and “right to the city” (also echoed in the New Urban Agenda’s call for “cities for all”). They and other late 20th century authors emphasize that the city is a dynamic and emergent co-creation of many actors, not a static creation by a small group of technical specialists.

Informality in the New Urban Agenda

Clos et al. (2018) argue that the New Urban Agenda “challenges the value of anachronistic ‘bottom-up vs top-down’ models, so heavily rooted in western urbanism” (3). In particular, they call for “a more open, malleable and incremental urbanism” that is emergent, ambiguous, and co-produced by the residents of the city. In that sense, the authors are pointing to the essential role of *informality* as a core process of urbanization, as we discuss in more detail below. This informality should not be ignored or suppressed, but rather supported and coordinated with more formal actions, so as to produce Simon’s “preferred conditions.”

Within the academic literature on urbanism today, the term “informality” is used in a number of related but distinct, and therefore potentially confusing, ways. In urban sociology literature, informality is commonly used to describe urban structures that emerge (at least partially) without formal planning, such as favelas, slums, and other “unplanned” settlements; the term is also used to describe a variety of shadow, second, or covert economies (Misztal 1999; Hansen and Vaa 2004; Dupont et al. 2015; McFarlane and Waibel 2012).

Christiansen and Neuhold (2012) identify at least three separate usages of informality within the literature. First is the designation of the framework within which decisions are taken as being informal (institutions, organizations, networks); second is the identification of the process or procedure through which policies are made as being informal (politics, arrangements, activity); and, third is the classification of the outcome of any such process as being informal (rules, norms, influence).

Roy and AlSayyad offer new insights on the complexity of informal and formal interactions, particularly in the Global South, and the role of the state in creating constraints that shape informal activities (Roy and AlSayyad 2004; Roy 2009, 2011). Varley (2007, 2010) also describes the ambiguous “grey zones” that commonly accompany property formalization, and the role of states in setting the parameters of informality, specifically in the Global South. The notion of “grey zones” is particularly important to understanding the ambiguity and complexity of informal development and its interactions with more formal systems (Thomassen 2014, 2015; Knudsen and Frederiksen 2015).

Other authors have demonstrated the uniquely local (non-Western) variations of informality that have occurred in the Global South, including Simone and Pieterse’s (2018) discussion of African and Asian urban contexts; Caldeira and Holston’s (2007) examination of local democratic interventions within modernist (Western) planned projects in Brazil; and Caldeira’s (2017) study of autoconstruction at the urban periphery in the Global South. These authors challenge the notion that all urbanization—including informal urbanization—proceeds logically from a Western-originated model, and they demonstrate the uniqueness and complexity of local responses.

Finally, Roy (2005) highlights how informality can be strategically used by planners to mitigate some of the vulnerabilities of the urban poor, and how this requires a recognition by planners of an implied “right to the city” as a form of distributive justice. Informal structures are shaped not only by local and emergent processes, but by a “mix of sovereignties” and a set of models and best practices not yet sufficiently critiqued for what has gone wrong.

This articulation of the concept of informality as a phenomenon that is intensely local, complex, and emergent echoes newer insights from the sciences about self-organization in natural systems also described by Alexander, Simon, and especially Jacobs. In Jacobs’s landmark *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961), she describes “the kind of problem a city is” as one of “organized complexity” in which informal and self-organizing processes are essential. She gives a lucid account of the then-dawning understanding of biological complexity in the sciences, and draws specific parallels to urbanism. She ends the book with this hopeful message: “Lively, diverse cities contain the seeds of their own regeneration, with energy enough to carry over for problems and needs outside themselves” (448).

This understanding of informality as self-organizing complexity—and especially as a city co-produced by its people—rings throughout Jacobs’s book. At the end of the

second section, she declares, “Cities have the capability of providing something for everybody, only because, and only when, they are created by everybody” (238).

Jacobs contrasts this dawning understanding of self-organizing complexity with older methods of planners, which were still dominant at that time. She singles out the architect Le Corbusier as having had “an immense impact on our cities” (23). But this impact was not positive:

His city was like a wonderful mechanical toy. Furthermore, his conception, as an architectural work, had a dazzling clarity, simplicity, and harmony. It was so orderly, so visible, so easy to understand. It said everything in a flash, like a good advertisement . . . But as to how the city works, it tells . . . nothing but lies. (23)

Informality in the 1933 Charter of Athens: A Problem to be Eradicated

Joan Clos, the secretary general of Habitat III, also identified Le Corbusier’s influence as profound, and profoundly destructive. Writing with colleagues (including sociologists Richard Sennett and Saskia Sassen, and planner Ricky Burdett) in *The Quito Papers*, Clos described the older paradigm as a Western-dominated relic of the highly influential 1933 Charter of Athens: “Despite the increasing complexity and specificity of the global urban condition, many of the 94 recommendations of the 1933 Charter of Athens still determine the generic forms and physical organization of the 21st century city” (Sassen et al. 2017).

The 1933 Charter of Athens was first documented by Le Corbusier in a book of that name some ten years later (Le Corbusier 1943). Its ideas—or the versions of them handed down by Le Corbusier—were developed in a meeting by the highly influential Congrès Internationaux d’Architecture Moderne, or CIAM, a leading group of European architects and urbanists of that time. The outlines of the draft were developed during a legendary cruise from Marseilles to Athens, giving the document its name.

Many of the central ideas of 20th century urban planning—functional segregation, superblock patterns, segregation of streets by types of movement, and removal of buildings from the street—were laid out in the Charter of Athens (Gold 1998). While there are precedents for these ideas elsewhere, it is difficult to overstate the profound influence of this document on the history of modern planning up to the present day (Jacobs and Appleyard 1987; Sassen et al. 2017).

When it comes to informal settlements, the Charter of Athens is very clear: They are to be demolished without hesitation. The charter states,

Unsanitary blocks of houses must be demolished and replaced by green areas: the adjacent housing quarters will thus become more sanitary. (Le Corbusier 1943, ¶ 36)

The destruction of the slums around historic monuments will provide an opportunity to create verdant areas. (ibid., ¶ 69)

Likewise, there is little tolerance of informal or ambiguous aspects of urbanization, of “chance” or “improvisation,” which should be eliminated:

It is a matter of the most urgent necessity that every city draw up its program and enact the laws that will enable it to be carried out. Chance will give way to foresight, and program will replace improvisation. (ibid., ¶ 85)

In dramatic contrast to the Athens Charter, the New Urban Agenda embraces informal settlements and proposes that they be “upgraded” rather than demolished:

We will . . . [prioritize] renewal, regeneration and retrofitting of urban areas, as appropriate, including the upgrading of slums and informal settlements.... (United Nations 2017, ¶ 97)

We will support the provision of well-designed networks of safe, accessible, green and quality streets and other public spaces that are accessible to all . . . fostering both formal and informal local markets and commerce. (ibid., ¶ 100)

In addition, informality would arise from the participatory actions of citizens “socially producing” their own spaces:

We commit ourselves to promoting national, subnational and local housing policies that support . . . enabling the participation and engagement of communities and relevant stakeholders in the planning and implementation of these policies, including supporting the social production of habitat. (ibid., ¶ 31)

We share a vision of cities for all . . . [that] are able to inhabit and produce just, safe, healthy, accessible, affordable, resilient and sustainable cities and human settlements. (ibid., ¶ 11)

This New Urban Agenda does explicitly propose what it terms a “paradigm shift” for planning. It is a move away from the older models of urbanization:

We commit ourselves to working towards an urban paradigm shift for a New Urban Agenda that will . . . readdress the way we plan, finance, develop, govern and manage cities and human settlements. (ibid., ¶ 15)

These older models of urbanization are, as Clos and his colleagues argued, still largely determined by the Charter of Athens and its concepts, “despite the increasing complexity and specificity of the global urban condition” (Sassen et al. 2017, 2).

A “New Paradigm” around Informality?

Clos and his co-authors argue instead for the need to embrace a more “open” kind of urbanization:

The patterns of urbanization today require a re-framing of the discourse and practice of planning, one that questions the very tenets of the Charter of Athens and challenges the value of anachronistic ‘bottom-up vs top-down’ models, so heavily rooted in western urbanism. More work is needed to complement the New Urban Agenda, helping to mark

a paradigm shift away from the rigidity of the technocratic, generic modernist model we have inherited from the Charter of Athens towards a more open, malleable and incremental urbanism that recognizes the role of space and place--and how they are shaped by planning and design--in making cities more equitable. (Clos et al. 2018, 3).

The words “incremental,” “malleable,” and “open” point to a significant role for informality as an essential aspect of urbanization, but one that is nonetheless to be engaged and “shaped” by planning and design under the New Urban Agenda. This is certainly a major shift away from the intolerance of informality seen in the earlier Charter of Athens.

This contrast of design paradigms can be seen clearly in contrasting passages from the Charter of Athens and the New Urban Agenda, where the Charter of Athens states, “Plans will determine the structure of each of the sectors allocated to the four key functions and they will also determine their respective locations within the whole” (Le Corbusier 1943, ¶ 78).

This is a “determined” approach to planning, with sectors functionally segregated and allocated according to a precise and static scheme. By contrast, the New Urban Agenda recognizes a more flexible and dynamic approach to planning, embracing change over time, evolution, incremental growth, informality, and the “emergent” acts of many planners and builders:

We will also strive to build flexibility into our plans in order to adjust to changing social and economic conditions over time. (United Nations 2017, ¶ 94)

We will encourage the development of policies, tools, mechanisms and financing models . . . that would address the evolving needs of persons and communities, in order to improve the supply of housing . . . This will include support to incremental housing and self-build schemes, with special attention to programmes for upgrading slums and informal settlements. (ibid., ¶ 107)

Thus, planning and design must not only recognize self-organization as posing a limitation on “bounded rationality,” but moreover, see it as a *resource to engage*. The designer is not simply seeking to restrain the negative consequences of self-organization. On the contrary, the designer is actively using self-organization as a tool. The design lies precisely in the way that self-organization is activated and directed.

One might use the analogy of the difference between carpentry and gardening. In carpentry, the goal is to measure and cut parts that will go together in fairly direct, determined ways. In gardening, however, the goal is to support desired forms of growth, using good soil, seeds, water, fertilizer, pruning—and of course, some carpentry too, in the form of planter boxes, trellises, and the like. But these supportive frameworks are not the end goal; they are the means to the goal, which is the support of the living structure—the informal growth.

In that sense, we may say that the purpose of Sennett’s infrastructure is to form a kind of “urban trellis” of the city. Good “seeds”—successful design types and pat-

terns—can produce new growth of the kind that is “preferred.” Financial investments and economic incentives can further promote preferred growth, and regulatory controls can limit destructive kinds of growth.

This approach might be called “design for self-organization.” The goal is not a predetermined state, but, following Simon, a “preferred” state whose specific features might not be known, or even knowable, in final detail. Indeed, the complexity of the outcome might well be so immense that it is impossible to make a predetermination, for any but the most lifeless, inadequate responses. Without engaging self-organization—without engaging informality—urban planners are limited by their own “bounded rationality” to only unsatisfactory results.

Nor is this a *laissez-faire* approach that suggests it is acceptable to just let things emerge, or “let the market decide.” A *laissez-faire* approach focuses on an atomic conception of a consumer or market, and ultimately prevents the pursuit of “preferred states” by societies or their constituents. Emphasis should not be placed on self-organization for its own sake, but *design* for self-organization—to achieve the states preferred by citizens individually and collectively.

In this sense, the concept of “design for self-organization” (or design for informality) is only apparently a contradiction in terms. In fact, it expresses Simon’s original definition of design as transformation: Offering a way to efficiently explore and manage “autocatalytic pathways” between the existing and the preferred.

Implementing Informality in the New Urban Agenda

There remains, of course, the overwhelming question of how the New Urban Agenda’s aspiration of engaging informality will be implemented, and how it can assure positive outcomes in that process. There are four principal strategies called for within the document, and further articulated by Habitat III stakeholders, as discussed in more detail below: One, engaging with data; Two, engaging with community-based planning; three, engaging with infrastructure; and four, engaging with strategic interventions.

1. Engaging informality with data

Many advocates for residents of informal settlements have sought to give residents greater access to data as a tool for the generation of social and political capital, and the development of their neighborhoods. For example, Anni Beukes of Shack/Slum Dwellers International described their work to create an international platform for use by members of these communities:

SDI affiliates use data collection to produce social and political capital for themselves, both linking their communities together and building relations with their local authorities and other government agencies. The data they produce has become the basis of a powerful social and political argument that has seen the leveraging of substantive improvements in the lives of millions of slum dwellers across the global South. (Beukes 2015)

The New Urban Agenda references this provision of open-source data tools as well, when it states, “We will foster the creation, promotion and enhancement of open, user-friendly and participatory data platforms using technological and social tools available to transfer and share knowledge among national, subnational and local governments and relevant stakeholders, including non-State actors and people.” (United Nations 2016, ¶ 160).

More broadly, the use of data as a tool for self-organization and neighborhood-scale problem-solving is growing. A number of new businesses and nonprofits are developing “crowdsourcing” tools to help communities deal with local problems, including Code for America (Dyson 2013). In 2015, the Santa Fe Institute convened international organizations (including Slum Dwellers International) to a conference titled *Acting Locally, Understanding Globally: Scaling Up Community-Collected Data in Developing Cities*. The conference produced a concluding document that read, in part:

The process of synthesizing local knowledge also provides individuals an opportunity for self-organization, empowerment, and engagement with the decision-making process. Recognizing that a plurality of conceptions of well-being exists, we must ensure that the capacity for individuals and local governments to actively engage and improve their own wellbeing is built into this synthesis process. (Mehaffy 2015b)

Likewise, the New Urban Agenda calls for similar shareable local knowledge and tools, as when it states:

We will promote the development of national information and communications technology policies and e-government strategies, as well as citizen-centric digital governance tools, tapping into technological innovations, including capacity development programmes, in order to make information and communications technologies accessible to the public . . . broadening participation and fostering responsible governance, as well as increasing efficiency. (United Nations, 2017, ¶ 156)

2. Engaging informality with community-based planning, and the “social production” of urban and public spaces

As we saw previously, the New Urban Agenda represents a “paradigm shift” away from the specialist-led approach to urban development embodied in the Charter of Athens, toward a much more participatory process of urban co-creation. As the New Urban Agenda states, we need tools “enabling the participation and engagement of communities and relevant stakeholders in the planning and implementation of these policies, including supporting the social production of habitat” (United Nations 2016, ¶ 31).

This “social production” requires a distributed network of agents conducting formal and informal processes, following the principle of “subsidiarity.” In other words, what is needed is the support of more local actions by more centralized agencies: “We will develop and implement housing policies at all levels, incorporating participatory planning and applying the principle of subsidiarity” (United Nations 2016, ¶ 105).

In addition, the New Urban Agenda calls for the formation of “co-production networks” for its implementation:

We recognize the significant contribution of voluntary collaborative initiatives, partnerships and coalitions that plan to initiate and enhance the implementation of the New Urban Agenda, highlighting best practices and innovative solutions, including by promoting co-production networks between subnational entities, local governments and other relevant stakeholders. (ibid., ¶ 154)

A number of communities are pushing forward with tools to achieve this kind of participatory, subsidiary, and co-produced planning. A notable example is the city of Medellín, Colombia, which has seen a remarkable renaissance of its informal settlements following processes of community planning, participatory budgeting, and related implementation tools (Mehaffy 2013). It will be important to institute a platform where these tools can be shared and developed. Indeed, the New Urban Agenda calls for “the sharing of best practices, policies and programmes” as a matter of high priority (United Nations 2016, ¶ 81).

3. Engaging informality with infrastructure

Just as the growth of a healthy garden requires supportive frameworks (trellises, planter boxes, pipes for irrigation, etc.), so too the growth of a healthy neighborhood could be said to require a supportive “framework for informality.” Clearly the needs of informal settlements for cleaner energy and safer transport are central, and indeed, the New Urban Agenda calls for them: “We also commit ourselves to giving particular attention to the energy and transport needs of all people, particularly the poor and those living in informal settlements” (United Nations 2016, ¶ 54).

In this sense, infrastructure is a catalytic tool to support the growth of helpful structures within an informal settlement. The investment of top-down resources is leveraged to produce desired bottom-up growth.

More broadly, public space is itself a critical kind of urban infrastructure, which is made clear in the seven paragraphs where it is discussed within the New Urban Agenda. While parts of the city and its public spaces are “socially produced,” as we have already seen, it is also important to plan for an essential network of public spaces, as an infrastructure framework for human and economic development. This includes the streets themselves, as well as other spaces:

We commit ourselves to promoting safe, inclusive, accessible, green and quality public spaces, including streets, sidewalks and cycling lanes, squares, waterfront areas, gardens and parks, that are multifunctional areas for social interaction and inclusion, human health and well-being, economic exchange and cultural expression and dialogue among a wide diversity of people and cultures, and that are designed and managed to ensure human development. (ibid., ¶ 37)

This form of infrastructure, then, serves as a “driver” of social and economic development, which is generated informally, as in this passage:

We commit ourselves to promoting safe, inclusive, accessible, green and quality public spaces as drivers of social and economic development, in order to sustainably leverage their potential to generate increased social and economic value. (ibid., ¶ 53)

A number of research centers are working with UN-Habitat to develop and share research knowledge, including the Centre for the Future of Places at KTH Royal Institute of Technology in Stockholm (foprn.org 2018).

4. Engaging informality with strategic interventions

The last two decades have seen a number of significant experiments in “guiding informality.” We previously mentioned the city of Medellín, Colombia, which has built several prominent new civic facilities in the midst of informal settlements as a way of catalyzing healthy growth around them. The city also built an escalator system in its Comuna 13 neighborhood, with positive results for the livability of the neighborhood (Mehaffy 2013). This kind of strategic intervention has been called “urban acupuncture,” a term coined by Barcelona architect Manuel de Sola Morales, and developed further by a number of activists including Jaime Lerner, former mayor of Curitiba, Brazil (Lerner 2014).

A similar idea was described by Jacobs (1961), as she referred to public buildings and other projects as “chess pieces” that could be moved in concert to catalyze desirable growth in different parts of the city. This was one key reason that she discouraged the idea of concentrated “civic districts.”

More recently, New Urbanists and others have begun practicing “tactical urbanism,” a coordinated series of small-scale interventions that gradually transform a neighborhood. As proponent Mike Lydon says, tactical urbanism is just a formalized tool that captures what already happens: “Really, tactical urbanism is how most cities are built. Especially in developing nations. It’s step-by-step, piece-by-piece” (Berg 2012). Lydon and his colleagues have gathered up many tactical urbanism tools into a compendium (i.e., Street Plans Collaborative 2012).

A similar effort is the so-called “placemaking movement,” which promotes the sharing of tools and resources for informal actions by neighborhood activists, local agencies, and professionals. For example, an early guide in the USA is called “Placemaking: Tools for Community Action” (Concern Inc. et al. 2002). More recently, Project for Public Spaces (PPS) has been active in developing an international network to promote and share placemaking tools (Project for Public Spaces 2018). PPS has also been a partner of UN-Habitat in developing some of the concepts of the New Urban Agenda, and is now playing an active role in developing implementation tools.

As we discussed earlier, Richard Sennett’s own model of the “open city” includes similar tactical thinking. He proposes three “systematic elements” to be used for engag-

ing informality within the open city: 1. Passage territories, or transitional zones that function like membranes; 2. incomplete form, or structures that are deliberately created incompletely to be altered over time; and, 3. development narratives, taking a more flexible approach rather than the “determined” outcomes suggested in most contemporary “master plans” (Sennett 2018b).

Conclusion

The evidence does show, then, that the New Urban Agenda reflects a major shift toward engaging informality—what may be called a “new paradigm.” However, a cynical person might ask about the utility of such a shift toward engaging informality—indeed, what use is the New Urban Agenda—if the document is merely a voluntary agreement, and moreover, if current barriers to implementation cannot be overcome.

It is true that, at present, there is an interlocking global system for financing, planning, building, marketing, and managing human habitat—what we might think of as the global operating system for growth. This system has its roots in the production systems that were active at the time of the Athens Charter, and in many ways, it clearly embodies the same mechanical, top-down thinking. Specifically, this system, along with its many national and local sub-systems, consists of all the financial instruments, incentives and disincentives, models, standards, laws, rules, codes, and other components that determine what is profitable and not profitable, what is technically feasible and not, what is legal and not; in short, what can be built and not, and in what way. This system also determines the profound impacts of what is built, for better or worse, for different populations at different times. It is clearly performing well for certain populations at certain times, but performing inadequately for other populations, including the poor today and many others in future generations who will feel its many negative impacts. Indeed, this is the essence of the challenge for “sustainable development,” and for the United Nations recently-adopted Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2018).

The immediate problem for those seeking to engage informality as part of the New Urban Agenda is that this system tends to obstruct and supersede such efforts. Informal settlements that might be upgraded are instead demolished to make way for expensive new developments following a neoliberal model. Communities that might be able to generate more internal capacity, economic opportunity, and initiative are instead displaced and disempowered. Procedures for developing small businesses and informal economic activities are hopelessly mired in onerous bureaucratic procedure and cost, or face other insurmountable obstacles.

One might well ask too if all the talk of informality and “self-organization” is not being used as a cover for an even more extreme neoliberal approach to development. After all, if communities can self-organize in more “open” and “malleable” ways, and the role of government is to be reduced in “top-down” planning, then surely the role of government in planning can be reduced or even eliminated altogether. But that is not

at all what the New Urban Agenda calls for. As this analysis has shown, the document aims to provide (in concert with other actors) what we might think of as the ultimate infrastructure: a shareable, global platform for change to support an “operating system for growth,” which involves partnerships between governments, professionals, civil society, and private businesses. Indeed, the New Urban Agenda suggests just this kind of response in its concluding sections on implementation:

We recognize that the implementation of the New Urban Agenda requires an enabling environment and a wide range of means of implementation, including access to science, technology and innovation and enhanced knowledge-sharing on mutually agreed terms, as well as capacity development and mobilization of financial resources. (United Nations 2016, ¶ 126)

These financial resources must be generated in part through the capacities of urbanization itself, particularly its ability to monetize the long-term benefits of its growth, and similar externalities:

We will mobilize endogenous resources and revenues generated through the capture of benefits of urbanization, as well as the catalysing effects and maximized impact of public and private investments, in order to improve the financial conditions for urban development and open access to additional sources. (ibid., ¶ 132)

This is, of course, an ambitious goal, to say the least. There are valid reasons to question the efficacy, the rigor, and even the mixed political motivations behind such an aspirational document.

At the same time, it seems only fair, and important given the stakes, to acknowledge the historic accomplishment of the New Urban Agenda. All 193 member states of the United Nations have now adopted, by consensus, a framework agreement for the character of urbanization moving into the 21st century and beyond, with notably explicit new references to informality as it occurs in diverse contexts, including the Global South. The need for place-specific analyses and solutions has been affirmed. Moreover, as we have seen, the thinking behind the document rejects a simplistic binary distinction between top-down and bottom-up, between the formal and the informal, and it offers a more subtle, and ultimately more powerful, strategic approach to engaging formal as well as informal processes.

Certainly, this framework agreement is only the first task of a much longer process. Even still, it establishes a new international platform for developing and sharing tools for local and self-determined urbanization. It clearly does so based upon a new and more encompassing set of models and concepts, reflecting a deeper understanding of the vital role of informality and its necessary engagement within a healthier urbanism.

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