Informal/Peripheral Production

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Informal/Peripheral

"There is much room for radical political people to contest the meanings of the breached boundary" (Harraway, 1991:153)[1]

This research project explores a four-year (and on-going) research project into the production of informal spaces. Informal spaces (or something akin to informal spaces) are known variously as: autonomous, transgressive, or loose spaces; or terrain vague, and are often found in derelict or left over parts of the city. European examples include travellers' camps, squatted spaces, wastelands etc, whereas in the '*global south*' there are entire informal cities, for example the slums in Mumbai, barrios in Sao Paolo and the nation-site of Haiti[2,3,4].

Informal networks exist at the edges of formal divisions, official systems and regulated processes; informality often requires the breaching, breaking or transgressing of boundaries linked with unregulated, unofficial and/or illegal use. This nexus with the edge boundary is a peripheralised relationship where social and spatial production is enmeshed within mutually constitutive networks. Informal spaces are often out of the gaze of formal authority and official surveillance. In the UK they are used by a wide variety of heterogeneous users from illicit users such as: sex-workers, alcoholics, drug-takers, ravers and graffiti artists to more prosaic activities: gardening, resting on a bench, children playing and dog-walking. The use of informal spaces is dependent on the chosen (or necessary) activity of its users. As such, informal spaces play a rareified role within the urban fabric for providing less programmed and ambiguous space that might be used in a number of ways. This allows the questioning of accepted articles of faith relating to space, society and architecture.

Informality

Informal spaces are defined here as spaces used on a temporary basis by individuals or groups who do not own the space[5]. This definition of 'informal' is partly dependent on 'spatial' qualities. The term '*informal*' in this context derives from the United Nations re-definition of slums into 'informal' cities[6]. The UN definition of an informal city based on "*land to which the occupant have no legal claim, or which they occupy illegally*"[7].Informality is defined spatially and socially in relation to a pejorative legal status. Informality is also conceptualized *through* space occupied by informal societies or actions [8,9]. Informality becomes a transient, temporary, fluxive condition which stands in contradistinction to the static zoning laws and land-use plans of institutional

control. Informality is 'performed' in social and spatial contexts; it is not an *a priori* condition.

Producing Informal Space

'*Production*' has multiple meanings and definitions in the context of the informal/peripheral space. The Oxford English dictionary[10] defines production as "*something which is produced by an action*" and "*the action or an act of producing, making*" which situates production as both: a process *and* the outcome of a process. This *double-entendre* of production is appropriate with many of the activities that occur within such spaces, as they often have a hidden and illicit side.

Within the meanings of production, there are four distinct modes of operation that are discussed here. The first definition is the physical production of an informal space; building, digging, planting, construction, painting, weaving, moving objects, modifying 'things'. This form of production is also described as; making, constructing, DiY, re-appropriating[11,12,13]. Physical change brought about by human action is classified as a form of production. Some of the physical change might be brought about as an unintended consequence of human action, but it can include intentional change. This production might be the deliberate modification or construction of an informal space for a specific purpose or with a strategic aim; production might also be modification of an informal space for various purposes on an ad hoc basis. Either forms of production could be permanent, temporary or transient in duration.

A second definition relates to social 'production'. Informal space might be 'produced' through the action of individuals and social groups[14] .In this definition, the physical space does not necessarily change, but the activity of its users change the meaning, purpose or classification of that space[15]. Events and carnivals are infrequent social occurrences, but are often related to specific spaces; these events can generate an alternative production of space[16].

Situated between the physical and social is the third form of production. Social and spatial actions are related to knowledge. Through action, a form of knowledge is produced that is part social and part spatial[17]. De Certeau[18] claims that practices enable individuals to be able to shift from consumers to "*unrecognised*" producers. Production in this context can be understood to be when "*individuals (and groups) are productive, and not just reactionary or passive, forces in the games of truth*"[19]. Action is the process through which production of meaning is generated. Latour[20] describes this form of productivity, "*Nothing in a given scene can prevent the inscribed user or reader from behaving differently from what was expected.*" Individuals produce their own meaning within a socio-spatial context.

A fourth mode of production can also occur as part of a 'performed' socio-spatial network. Production is a relationship between various socio-spatial entities that has to be maintained[21]. Production has a relational quality that is part process and part end-product. Informal spaces are performed through multiple actions as a form of production. This form of production is "*done and enacted*" which can take place in multiple sites; historically, discursively, physically, legally etc[22]. There is no finished product per se, but only an on-

going process where "*things get performed (and perform themselves) into relations*"[23]. The social and the spatial are '*produced*' through performances made visible through their fragile constitution amidst durable structures.

As shown, production can be understood in multiple ways; as process and product; as a physical and/or social act; or as the enactment of socio-spatial relationship. Informal spaces are produced through multiple modes into a site of knowledge; a form of knowledge is produced that is part social and part spatial.

Peripherality *post-production*.

What do these multiple modes of production generate? Through the blurring and joining across informal spaces, liminal peripheries are re-aligned, dissolved and identities defined. Peripherality is a space of difference. These spaces are peripheral in multiple senses: geographically they are located 'on the edge', in that they are defined and conceptualised in relation to formal space. This leads also to the sense that the peripheral is an other space, an Othered space, it is not defined or understood in and of itself – only in relationship to the formal[24]. These spaces are peripheral in the sociological sense: its users and the activities occurring are often illegal, illicit or transgressive. They become peripheralized through the production of activities that transgress accepted boundaries[25].

Peripheral Knowledge

Informality questions the role and status of formal knowledge, in particular it requires a re-examination of the status of the architectural 'profession' and its relationship to space and society. These spaces destabilize formal knowledge mechanisms in three ways. First they change the material from architecture is literally constituted; by accepting the junk, waste, dirt, X products and debris of these spaces, a new library of materials enters the lexicon of architecture. Claiming these materials echoes the political ecologies that have reterritorialized weeds qua biodiversity[26]. Informal spaces thus critique the material nature of the urban public realm. Secondly the informal shifts the author from architect or other professional to 'others'. The others in this context include both social and non-social authors: biological, mineral, semiotic, political along with the Others: those whose voice was previously hidden or undermined. The mechanisms used for the examination of productive/informal: define, classify, categorise, delimit is yet more peripheralization[27]. Identities are assigned according to groups, actors, sub-groups, sub-cultures which separate centre and edge, build boundaries, construct borders, dominant and subordinate[28]. Thirdly, they undermine the authority of those currently in control by ceding power. Authority is dispersed and thus the centre is either extended to recuperate that which lies outside or dissipates control. The centre becomes peripheralized in a one-way direction, it cannot be un-known. Alternate identities are enacted *ultra vires* across informal spaces through contested peripheral boundaries. Breaching the liminal positions of space and society, informal spaces reveal a heterogenous assemblage of actors. Their productive detritus leave physical traces of discourse that disturb the stasis of architecture. The spaces of the informal remain a political space and function as a mirror and critical feedback mechanism to formal architecture.

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Biography

Louis Rice is an architect who spent over a decade in practice in France and the UK. For the last five years he has worked as a Senior Research Fellow and Senior Lecturer at the University of England in Bristol; as head of urban design and currently runs the final year of BArch. His research interests include: informal urbanism, play and transgression.