Abstract

THESIS: From Rural to Urban: Studying Informal Settlements in Panama

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This thesis investigates five types of informal and self-built settlements in Panama City, Panama. The major part of the thesis focuses on precedents that are related to personal experiences encountered while researching a question developed during an independent study course at Ball State University. These experiences are germane to the place I have resided for virtually, my whole life, at the outskirts of an informal settlement in Panama City -- Barriada Nueve de Enero -- along with my personal relationship with Mrs. Emilia, my family’s domestic worker for more than thirteen years. In addition, the study of the five settlements will be accompanied by a set of minor design interventions that address immediate and local needs encountered while investigating each area.

In a country where already more than half the population (56%) resides in urban centers, and approximately sixty thousand people live in informal settlements, one might ask: What do rural immigrants bring with them to the informal settlements? And, what are the connections found that relate to their past lives in the rural areas? According to the UN-Habitat report of 2008, in the developing world there are approximately 5 million people making their trek each month to urban centers, and most of them end up squatting and self-building in some informal settlement, making them, as stated by Robert Neuwirth in Shadow Cities, “the largest builders of the housing world.”

If it is in fact, the ‘precaristas - informal builders’ and ‘invasores - invaders’ of the world who are shaping our current and future cities, should we not be more interested in their knowledge, lifestyles, and building techniques? This thesis does not aim to answer all the questions about informal settlements in Panama, but it does try to expose a reality and hopefully generate an understanding towards one city, and at least one informal settler contributing to the fast-growing informal building phenomenon of the world.