From Rural to Urban: Studying Informal Settlements in Panama

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BY

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MUNCIE, INDIANA
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On the cover: A typical rural construction in one of the newest invaded territories of Panama City.
Author’s Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is the real and final copy of the thesis, as revised and accepted by the chair and thesis committee.

I am aware that this thesis can be scanned, photocopied, and electronically reproduced by students, professors, and others.
Abstract

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.
Acknowledgements

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To my old and new family.
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All photographs by author, unless otherwise indicated.
Prelude

I did not know her surname

Mrs. Emilia and I go way back. She has been a domestic worker at my house for over a decade. Even though she has had a sometimes contentious relationship with my parents (her employers), she and I clicked from the beginning. She has cared for me as if I were one of her own daughters, and I have always been fond of her, even though I agreed with my parents about her work ethic on several occasions. In September of 2008, I became interested in her life outside our house: her nights, her journey to work, her weekends, her neighborhood, her home.

In October of 2008, my thesis advisor Wes Janz came to Panama to observe my field research and to learn more about my home country. By that time, I had decided that Mrs. Emilia would be my one trustworthy source. She would be the one that would show me her home in the City, and she would be the one to take me back to her rural past. Once the three of us met, questions started flowing. Translations flew back-and-forth between professor, student, and domestic worker, informing our understanding of her life, family, and home. I was asked: Do you know what Mrs. Emilia’s last name is? I stuttered, I doubted, I guessed, I failed. “No,” was my answer.

At that moment, it became clear that I could have lived in Mrs. Emilia’s home in the informal settlement for my month of field research and still there would be much I would not know, pieces of the puzzle I would not find. It is this encountered unfamiliarity and obvious unknown dimensions and their unknowability, that made her story even more valuable. This moment -- not knowing her surname -- marked a critical moment in my investigation: What else did I not know about Mrs. Emilia?
Fig. 1.1: World Map showing the location of Panama.
1 Introduction

If I want to make a difference in the communities which I am interested, I need to understand how people think and view themselves among society - think locally. Then, by providing insightful information about them I can get other people interested about these communities - think globally. But the real question is: Will these people make a difference in me? Stated in my independent course paper: Research and Study of Migration Connections.

Throughout my life, my family and I have resided beside what was once considered an informal settlement in the densest district of Panama City - San Miguelito. This informal settlement was formed in the early 1980s as people from the west side of the country started moving to the city searching for better job opportunities. Most of the settlers came from either Azueros province or Veraguas province. In both, people’s main source of income was, and still is agriculture and raising cattle. The former informal settlement is now referred to as Barriada Nueve de Enero (Nine of January Neighborhood). And, what started as a hill of scattered self-built shanties of people coming from the rural regions is now considered a formal community within the City.

So, if Barriada Nueve de Enero is considered “formal” and accepted as such by government standards, why is it that its residents, once “illegal invaders,” are able to pass freely through our “middle-class” community at the bottom of the hill? Why is it that the middle-class residents do not endeavor to share the experiences of the residents at the top of the hill? After all, the residents of Barriada Nueve de Enero clean our houses, wash our cars, mow our lawns, offer beauty makeovers, and care for our children. I must confess that I never endeavored to visit or explore Barriada Nueve de

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1 Nueve de Enero: The Martyrs Day was a popular movement that occurred in Panama on Thursday, January 9, 1964. The organizers aimed to reclaim the presence of the Panamanian flag in the territory known as the Canal Zone, a strip of land around the Panama Canal, which was ceded to the United States in perpetuity with the Hay-Bunau Varilla Treaty. This event triggered the abolition of such treaty and pushed the Torrijos-Carter Treaties to be signed. These new treaties would grant complete operational management of the Panama Canal to the Panamanians.
Fig. 1.2: Plan of the location of my house and Nueva de Enero.

A Divisory wall between Nueva de Enero neighborhood and mine.
B Informal access from one neighborhood to the other.
C My house.
D Rio Abajo River, which divides San Miguelito District from Panama District.

Distance shown in feet. Distance from point C to B 1600 feet.
Introduction

Enero. The primary reason was simply, fear. Part of my fear was instilled by my parents. Another factor was by having to deal with real life-threatening situations in our community, mainly due to robberies. And so Nueve de Enero for a person like me is considered off limits, unsafe, and daring. So, what would it take for me to go in and walk around? What would be my motive? And what would I have to offer in order to gain trust and respect?

My inquiry did not start in Barriada Nueve de Enero. Nor, was I inquisitive about such communities and settlements as a practicing architect in Panama. My journey began through research and reflection of a similar scenario. One particular project had a significant impact on the evolution of my views: a competition to propose the redevelopment of several poor, in-decay communities trapped among the new developments arising in the City. These were small barriadas that had survived several attempts of demolition and government displacement because of the demand to construct new high rise buildings around Panama City. They were not considered formal, like the ones at San Miguelito District, nor were they new invaders. They had been living there years before settlements like Nueve de Enero started forming. So they were not moving without a fight. A few architects involved in social housing designs decided to create the competition mainly to promote interest and awareness about these communities. The truth is that none of these residents really believed someone was just going to come and reconstruct their homes, but they were grateful to be acknowledged. None of the actual design winners got to redevelop any of the neighborhoods but at least it got some young architects interested in the architectural alternatives that are very much distanced from the elite bubble they were so use to working in. To continue nurturing my interest, this thesis will explore five different types of informal settlements in Panama City while proposing minor design interventions related to the location of the settlement, the residents, and their current needs.

“The most successful schemes and urban redevelopment plans have been the ones where people living in the community are made participants of the planning and implementation of the projects.”

KALPANA SHARMA

Fig. 1.3 to 1.8: Photographs of the competition site. Barriada de Pueblo Nuevo. 
Photographs by author of this document.
Introduction

Turning Point

“I construct drawings as narratives that present and interpret with simple images and text the challenges and strategies of the communities I study.”

MARJETICA POTRČ

Is the making of a one-on-one scale model of a squatter detail meant to advocate or educate? For me, it meant both. As part of my first studio project as a Master of Architecture student, I was asked to choose a detail of a squatter building from random pictures and recreate it with real materials, while proposing an improvement. As an architect I had never been asked to scrutinize a detail of an informal construction. So I took particular interest in the project because it somehow rejected the standard definition of an informal building construction and embraced it as a valuable piece of architecture made by non-architects. This project took me back to the competition project in Panama and made me reflect about a more enduring involvement with the self-builders, informal, *invasores* - invaders, and *precaristas* - illegal occupants - of Panama.

For years, authors like Kalpana Sharma and Robert Neuwirth have been studying the complexities that arise within large slums and informal communities in cities like Mumbai, Rio de Janeiro, Istanbul, and Nairobi. These cities inevitable and rapid development is in very close connection with the migratory patterns of the country's people. In Dharavi for example, Asia's second largest slum, many immigrants are moving daily from rural villages to urban centers. Robert Neuwirth states that “three hundred people a day make the trek to Istanbul, three hundred more to Mumbai, and three hundred also to Nairobi.” For Latin America these massive migration events of

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3 In reference to Marjetica Potrč's drawing series and architectural case studies that she develops from her research projects, http://www.potrc.org/drawings.htm (accessed November 18, 2008).
4 *Pecaristas*: Referring to the illegal occupants of lands in Panama. They are referred with this term when they first arrive to invade the land.
   *Invasores*: Referring to the invaders of land. They are referred with this term long after they have invaded the land, even with the proper rights.
people from rural regions flourished particularly in places where people found work, usually close to metropolitan centers and cities’ industrial areas. 6 “In Latin America from the 1960s to the 1980s, as well as in Egypt, Turkey, and South Africa at different times, squatting took the form of land invasions, often with the support of radical groups or, more rarely, populist national governments.” 7 Today, the scenario of the so called informal communities in countries of Central and South America differ greatly from those observed in Asian and African nations. However, “Aguilar and Ward still believe that ‘it is in the peri-urban space that the reproduction of labor is most likely to be concentrated in the world’s largest cities in the 21st century’.” 8 In Panama, the primary reason that led to massive migration was scarce land upon which to grow among the central provinces of the country. People came looking for job opportunities in the City because they were left with enough land to eat, but not enough to produce and sell. Nicodemus Mutemi - an immigrant to the city of Nairobi - in a conversation with Robert Neuwirth explains that he left his homeland because “the problem, he said, is economic: You can grow enough to eat, but you can’t grow enough to live.” 9 As I read these authors and thought about the informal, the invaders, and the illegal occupants I became concerned with their past and their present. And this is how the thesis started with one question: What are the connections found in the urban informal settlements that relate to the residents’ recent past lives in rural settings?

“ When I arrived in Rocinha, I still had the idea that squatter communities had to be primitive. But Rocinha was nothing like I had ever imagined.”
ROBERT NEUWIRTH 10

7 Mike Davis, Planet of Slums, (New York: Verso, 2006), 38.

“In addition to the hillside hideouts, favelas sprang up where people found work. The larger favelas were in the city’s industrial northern region (the Zona Norte), while the Zona Sur (home of Rio’s famed beaches) had few squatter enclaves. By the 1940’s there were 36 principal favelas, but scores of other smaller self-built communities were shoehorned next to small factories all over the city.”
Introduction

These urban informal settlements are usually consisting of a mix of city-born settlers and immigrants from the rural regions. In the metropolitan area of Panama City, these immigrants are referred to as precaristas or invasores of lands. Often, the rural citizens migrate to the city because they have an extended family residing there or in search of better job opportunities. These central province natives - referring to immigrants from Azueros and Veraguas provinces - are usually dedicated to farming and either own or will inherit a portion of land. But they still come to the city. So what evidence exists that these immigrants retain a rural sensibility in terms of who they are and where they came from?

The initial purpose of the thesis was to approach basic questions of how immigrants from rural and very isolated regions of the country settle in the City - Panama City. The core of the investigation consisted of a field research conducted in September of 2008 that aimed to locate at least one person who had recently moved and settled in some informal settlement in the City to find evidence in their current locations about their recent past lives. Due to research constraints in terms of time and accessibility the person appointed ended up being in very close relation with me and my family: Mrs. Emilia. I was not able to find the research connections I was looking for, but this closeness to Mrs. Emilia added a new set of questions and complexities related to the study of informal settlements in Panama City. The reason why this thesis is now concerned with the complex dynamics of having lived most of my life at the outskirts of one of the five informal settlement I propose to study while having a 13 year relationship with Mrs. Emilia, who migrated to city in hopes of better-life opportunities. Never had I, in more than a decade of knowing Mrs. Emilia, walked into her barriada and seen her home. Until now.

“Each observer makes sense of a city and creates his own image, though the type of image one creates about a place varies depending on the depth and quality of the information one has.”

ASHENAFI GOSAYE 11

Panorama

Today the conflict between the ‘gentrification’ process, property investment and the poverty and exclusion of a large part of the existing population is obvious. This phenomenon occurs in many other cities in Latin America, but in Panama there are special circumstances which are often overlooked: (a) living space in this city has periodically been scarce and expensive; (b) tenement housing is not a recent phenomenon, but an integral part of the history of the historic center. In Latin America the tenement housing problem usually emerged as a result of the decline of the historic centers, but in Panama the situation was fostered by the construction of the inter-oceanic waterway and the discriminatory laws of the Canal Zone.

Eduardo Tejeira Davis

The word tenement is not synonymous with informal, but several facts make the case that this housing phenomenon was the first type of informal settlement the city of Panama. Many tenement inhabitants were forced to move farther away from the city center forming new settlements that later became enormous communities like San Miguelito.

Fig. 1.9: Image of Casa Boyaca “Boyaca House”, An old tenement home in Panama City’s Old Quarter.

12 Eduardo Tejeira Davis, Panama City’s Old Quarter, (Sevilla; Panama: Editorial Bilingüe, 2005), 58.
Panama City is undergoing a massive urban change due mainly to foreign investment in commerce, banking, real state, and tourism. While many areas in the city are being redeveloped for commercial or residential use, especially in the center and close to the coastline, other areas seem to be frozen in time. These peri-urban areas are a mix of highly dense poor neighborhoods formed by invasores and middle-class communities of people for whom it has become impossible to afford the current real state market prices. There is an estimated one and a half million people residing in Panama City, and a little over a quarter live in what the government describes as spontaneous settlements resulting from the invasion of lands. Since the early 1990s there have been put in action large programs to legislate most of the established settlements. According to the *Ministerio de Vivienda* - Ministry of Housing - there are approximately 53,000 families in 188 informal settlements in the City - 26 settlements have now been legalized and the families have been provided with formal land rights. Even with the proper land tenures, these families possess particular social characteristics that depend on their origins, current location and insertion in the productive system of the country. It is one concern of this investigation to explore how some of these social characteristics are related to the way they live and how they develop their communities.

This thesis will study five different informal settlement cases in Panama City and propose an intervention to each according to the inhabitant's social characteristics. The following is a brief outline of the structure and components of the thesis:

Chapter two, Reviews, encompasses a review of relevant literature and designs based on the study and research of informal settlements by architects and non-architects from around the world. It serves as an anticipatory chapter by providing insightful and critical texts about the research topic, as well as revealing what is to be expected design wise in the final chapters of the thesis.

Chapter three, Panama, delves into Panama's urban origins and expansions. This chapter prepares the reader for an exploration into Panama City's informal emergence,
motivated by urban population movements, but also by the west and east migrations to the City: from the rural to the urban. Through the articulation of the three most pertinent topics relevant to the thesis: migration from the west to the east, government tenure, and informal settler’s mechanics; this chapter is a compilation of personal conversations, quotations, and textual and visual descriptions compiled during my research month in Panama City. The displacement of Panama City’s Old City Quarter, the population expansions, and the territorial limitations of the Panama Canal Zone are all factors that contributed to the formation of numerous spontaneous settlements within the urban metropolis of Panama.

Chapter four, Unfamiliar Encounter, is a chapter that reveals the personal relationship with Mrs. Emilia. A former rural immigrant and informal settler who has worked in our family for over thirteen years. This thesis was the reason behind the unfamiliar revelations of Mrs. Emilia’s life and all the relationship complexities that emerged with our acknowledgements of her past and present.

Chapter five, Informal Settlement Cases, explores five sites, five informal settlements within Panama City. Beginning with the oldest established and legalized settlement, passing through an informal settlement interweaving with the City’s oldest ruins, and ending on the west side with a planned settlement awaiting the arrival of the invaders, these cases will show a wide spectrum of intervention possibilities. The proposed interventions are not attempting to solve all the problems of the five communities or any informal settlement within Panama City. They are meant to personally promote understanding about these places through the language of design. It is more about my/our process of understanding these informal environments by starting small and through immersive intervention. Rather, them trying to embrace our suggested improvements to their communities and lives.

Chapter six and seven, Design Interventions and Reflections, will present the proposed interventions for each studied case, reflect on the covered material within the core of the thesis, and conclude with personal reviews and insights on the work and methodology.
Areas of Interest

The areas of interest were chosen according to their informal status. Ranging from very old and legalized settlements to areas which the government anticipates will be invaded, but will not formally legalize until the invaders arrive. This schematic map shows the emplacement of Panama City according to the Panama Canal cut. Due to its elongated shape, the city's main routes have an east-west direction which is how most of the population tends to orient. Each area will be studied in depth in Chapter Five.

Fig. 1.10: Map of Panama City urban area and the location of the five informal settlement cases.

- B: Panama Canal cut, Division between east and west of the city.
- C: Informal settlement near my house - Legalized.
- D: Informal settlement where Mrs. Emilia currently resides - Awaiting legalization.
- E: Informal settlement beside the city's oldest archeological ruins - Awaiting legalization.
- F: Informal settlement fighting the real state boom - Limbo status.
- G: Newest settlement on the west - Will be legalized when invaded.
Reviews is a chapter that originated from an Independent Study course meant to introduce different literature and authors with whom I share similar questions and views about the informal communities around the world. These authors include a wide range of architectural and non-architectural professionals whose work and personal interests has led them to compile eye-opening information about the millions of people who reside in the so called ‘informal settlements of the world.’ Of the ten authors researched for the course, I decided to choose the five most influential in terms of the places they visited and their critical views. These authors include a young journalist from India, a former real state writer from New York, an urbanist and professor from Ethiopia, a sociology professor from California who decided to live on the streets of Manhattan, and an architect who discovered something extraordinary in Turkey.

Since I personally experienced designing for an informal community in Buenos Aires, Argentina as part of a studio project, it seemed reasonable to include as part of this chapter several design reviews that would provide critical insight on the different approaches and interventions one can achieve in these communities. These designers and their projects were chosen according to the type of intervention they executed in each location, primarily small-scale interventions. Most of these interventions were either catalysts for future projects or originated as part of the expanding wave that began with someone’s vision and small contribution.

Since I have been able to meet and talk personally to authors like Robert Neuwirth, Hector LaSala, and Ashenafi Gossaye I have added my own insights and views towards their work as part of the reviews.
Fig. 2: Map of the Literature Review Profiles.

List of Literature Profiles

0.1 Kalpana Sharma: Rediscovering Dharavi: Stories from Asia’s Largest Slum.
0.2 Mitchell Duneier: Sidewalk.
0.3 Mary-Ann Ray: Gecekondu: Built in One Night Houses.
0.4 Robert Neuwirth: Shadow Cities: A Billion Squatters, A New Urban World.
0.5 Ashenafi Gossaye: Addis Ababa: In Progress or Crisis?
Literature Reviews

Kalpana Sharma: Rediscovering Dharavi: Stories from Asia’s Largest Slum.

Environment: Dharavi, Mumbai - India
World View: She sees a reality and wants people to be aware of its existence. “I want to discard sentimental middle-class attitudes towards the urban poor, instead, to see them as people like us who can think out and plan their own future.”

Dharavi is Asia’s second largest slum, spreading over 175 hectares while having a population of over 1 million people. For Kalpana Sharma, Dharavi is better defined as a “seething, compacted spread of energy, enterprise, deprivation and desperation which epitomizes the crisis of all fast-growing Indian cities, not just Mumbai.”  

Her purpose in studying Dharavi may come as a means to draw the attention of city planners, architects, government authorities, as well as the common citizen to the realities that many in Mumbai and around the world prefer to ignore: The emergence of the urban poor and the urgent need to find dignified spaces for the growing number people settling in these informal communities.

Rediscovering Dharavi was written from several perspectives. Among them, that of Kalpana Sharma’s journalist point of view: one interested in the people of Dharavi. She wanted to tell the story through the people and their lives, as she states: Their lives are Dharavi, and this is what I wanted to record. From a more objective perspective, her desire was to draw attention to one of the primary reasons why settlements like Dharavi are flourishing and growing at an exponential rate. That is, to better understand the major problems with the city’s urban planning and the government’s inability to manage the existence of these slums, even as they are ignored until the land becomes valuable enough that the city authorities require them for other purposes.

Her approach is to see the people of Dharavi for who they are. She relies on at least one source, one person that would help her enter Dharavi and “understand the complicated relationships between people and groups of the community.” She also needed to be prudent and create trust with more than one person in the community. These sources would be the ones providing helpful information and feedback, while helping to double-check or to follow up on her acquired information.

Among her many findings are those of the urban conflicts that arise when illegal occupants are recognized in settled slum areas. After being recognized, the occupants are provided with some of the basic services: water, sanitation, and sometimes redevelopment. The problem lies in the fact that the slum-dwellers have no legal status on these lands, which gives them no right to protest against displacement and relocation, eventually to another “uninhabitable piece of land, another slum.” Even more conflicting may be the illegal enterprises and industries that flourish in Dharavi. This informal commerce not only provides jobs for the established residents of Dharavi, but also to the numerous immigrants moving daily from rural villages to urban centers, like Mumbai. Sharma also clarifies that Dharavi should not be considered a slum in reference to the so-called informal settlements that arise within the cities. She emphasizes this important disparity because Dharavi existed when Mumbai was still Bombay. As the city of Bombay grew many communities of illegals where sent to what was an empty, unsuitable site because the land they had settled had become valuable and required by the government for other purposes. That empty site became Dharavi.

Her conclusions are linked to a wider and more profound understanding of the people living in one of the largest slums of the world. She understands that a slum is “not a chaotic collection of structures; it is a dynamic collection of individuals who have figured out how to survive in the most adverse of circumstances.” She notes that the major problem that growing cities in developing countries face is that of unequal development. That may also go hand-in-hand with unequal distribution of wealth and always wanting to “please the eyes of the elite.” The most successful schemes and urban redevelopment plans for places like Dharavi, have been the ones where the people living in these communities are made participants of the planning and the implementation of the projects. Kalpana Sharma also mentions that “there is an

order in the apparent disorder.” We have to stop believing that our solutions fit all and start understanding these communities before proposing apparent solutions. “Without such an understanding, even the most well-intentioned efforts prove to be unworkable.”

Personal Insight on Rediscovering Dharavi:

I find Sharma’s purpose in studying Dharavi humble and trustworthy in the sense that she is not suggesting a change to Dharavi’s identity. On the contrary, she implies the change should come in the outsiders who view Dharavi as a dangerous place, but do not seem to really understand its roots or the people. She explains that change can only be possible through deep understanding of these communities. But, why is change necessary? What I find somewhat challenging in her quest for understanding, is her actual background as a journalist and middle-class citizen in Mumbai. Does she really know what every person in Mumbai wants? We tend to believe that anyone who does not have a comfortable life like we do needs to be taken care of so they can achieve our apparent success. I am not implying that this is the way she thinks, but I have met people from informal settlements in Panama whose desire is to continue living as an ‘urban poor.’ They have stated that it is easier not to worry about paying for the basic needs when the government will always provide and the middle-class will always maintain them money wise by paying for these services. There are many types of ‘urban poor’ in a settlement populated with one million people, which makes me wonder: Do they all wish for redevelopment in the same manner? How can we be sure that working together with these communities will mean 100% support from those who live there? Why is Sharma studying Dharavi? To gain better understanding so we can achieve tolerance with the urban poor living in Dharavi slum? Or, to understand them so we, ‘the outsiders’, can bring solutions for what we assume is an informal way of living?

Mitchell Duneier: *Sidewalk*.

Environment: Manhattan, New York - United States

World View: He does not want to be just an observer of things that go on in life. He wants to be participant. He views the world through the eyes of the one that wants to be acknowledged. "I am committed to the idea that the voices of the people on Sixth Avenue need to be heard."¹⁸

Mitchell Duneier based his research on the streets of Manhattan. He set out to find answers about the life of the people that are seen daily on the sidewalks but never really observed or recognized. He starts with a simple question: Who’s who on the Sidewalk? He establishes that those on the sidewalk, on the intersection of Eighth Street, Greenwich Avenue, and the Avenue of the Americas - a.k.a., Sixth Avenue - are predominantly African-American book vendors.

Consequently, he formulates another important question in his research: "How the sidewalk life works today? What he ultimately discovered is that most of these vendors are mainly poor black men that either worked, lived or did both in upper-middle-class neighborhoods of the city of Manhattan. The initial purpose of his research was to write a book about one vendor he had become friends during his three-year research: Hakim. Nevertheless, Hakim made Mitchell Duneier realize that he was focusing too much on him and very little on other vendors that also occupied the sidewalk on Sixth Avenue. In order to help his friend and immerse himself in the sidewalk he decided to become a book vendor, in order to gain first hand experience of the daily life of the people on the sidewalk. Instead of asking the other vendors for interviews, he often asked questions while participating and observing.

"One of the greatest strengths of first hand observation is also its greatest weakness." 19 Through careful involvement in people's lives, we can get a fix on how their world works and how they see it, this being the great strength. On the contrary, he mentions that getting too involved might leave us with a less objective view of the important 'forces' (economic, cultural, and political forces that contribute to make these blocks a habitat) which influence and sustain the behavior of the people or communities we are trying to understand. By being immersed in the sidewalk, Mitchell Duneier was able to find answers about the life on this particular corner in Manhattan. Some of the main questions were related to the way these vendors viewed themselves to others and our predetermined assumptions. For example, Hakim viewed himself as a 'public character', meaning that public characters always have eyes upon the streets. Most of the author's questions where not meant for the vendors but in a sense for us, because we need to understand how our cultural, social, economic, and political influences are shaping these people and these communities on the sidewalk. For example he asks: How do the acts of these vendors intersect with the city's mechanisms to regulate its public spaces? Do we eradicate them? And if we do; Where do they go? His intent was not to propose a solution for the street vendors or the government, neither did he take sides. Mitchell Duneier's motive was that of gaining reliable information about the life on the street for people whose voices and stories have not been told.

Personal Insight on Sidewalk:

"The presence of such people today means that pedestrians handle their social boundaries in situ, whereas, in the past, racial segregation and well-policed skid-row areas kept the marginal at bay." 20 It is my understanding and experience as a non-street vendor that no one wants that life. Or do we? Duneier creates a framework for understanding that these vendors on the sidewalk are as important to the city as any other citizen. In a hypocritical state, we wish we could eradicate them from the streets, maybe because they are not like us, or maybe it is the fact that we think of them as thieves making money through informal commerce. The truth is that we can all be

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blamed for these vendors on the street. Like Mitchell Duneier mentions: economic, cultural, and political forces have brought these men and women to the streets but, how and under what circumstances? I think one of his strongest contributions, which helped him understand these circumstances, was his immersive, first-hand experience as a vendor. Then again it might also be the greatest weakness, just as he mentions. If I could, I would ask him: How involved should one get with the reliable source or sources to create trust, but also gain objective information about the real forces and circumstances that brought those men to the sidewalk? I believe this question is relevant for my research in Panama because I have repeatedly questioned if one month is enough to acquire important information without compromising trust and objectiveness? How do we measure that trust? For Mitchell Duneier it was three years of friendship with Hakim and a summer with Hakim’s friends, so: How do I make my short stay valuable enough for friendship, trust or just acknowledgement?
Mary-Ann Ray: Gecekondu: Built in One Night Houses.

Environment: Ankara - Turkey

World View: She is amazed to have discovered that some things she thought she knew about her profession could be challenged.

Personal Insight on Gecekondu:

“Building is a verb: The Gecekondu are in a continual state of construction, for the builder is the inhabitant and the inhabitant the builder.”

I had never heard of a law in Panama that allows builders to keep the land and their recently built home if they were able to construct it in one night. Nonetheless, I believe these constructions are characteristic of the way informal communities build themselves. Whether it be one night, weeks, months or several years, in communities like this ‘building is a verb.’ These communities are far from sedentary and in constant change. Ray seems to be amazed at how challenging these builders are to the architecture profession. Even though, the gecekondu homes are an exceptional case of self-built survival, I have seen builders in Panama start their adobe home at 6:00 am and have it done late in the afternoon. So, what is it about our profession that we seem to be so caught up in calling something architecture just because it has been schemed over and over, and reconsidered over and over?

“From within the thing we were used to calling architecture, in which we were usually told that we needed to toil over and consider and reconsider every move we made. A desire to work this other way was something we acquire in the open air of the gecekondu.”

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Rural to Urban: Studying Informal Settlements in Panama

I think the best contribution of this research is the documentation and explanation of each image as if it were shown in an important architecture magazine. This type of work opens ground for many others to start looking at our profession differently. Not that conventionally taught architecture will now be dismissed by the work of non-architects, but we certainly can not ignore the self-builders of the world. Would I be equally amazed about what I find in Panama in terms of the way the architecture is built and land claimed by the urban poor? Would I find myself any ‘gefekondo’ homes even though there is no law that actually protects them in Panama? Or, is there? I think it would be a great tactic if I am able to figure out the way these people become ‘owners’ of these lands and whether or not they are supported by a larger political structure. It is something I am completely unaware of at the moment.

Note: The answers to these questions are revealed in Chapters 3 and 4.

Environment: Rio de Janeiro - Nairobi - Mumbai - Istanbul

World View: He sees a responsibility to others that many of us seem to ignore.

Personal Insight on Shadow Cities:

“They built their illegal homes simply because they couldn’t afford anywhere else to live. And from that humble origin, against all odds, they produce something complex and sometimes harsh and unruly. They produce a new city.”  

“They should have been in Sultanbeyli and other squatter neighborhoods, learning from the land invaders.” I enjoy how Neuwirth puts into perspective the fact that as architects, planners, and developers we will never have a clue of what really goes on in the ‘informal city’ if we keep trying to organize, propose, and intervene from our comfort zones. Then again, do they need us to organize, propose, and intervene? In his talk with Armstrong O’Brian from Kenya, Armstrong mentions how simple life is in the slums, because nobody is really controlling what you do or restricting you in any way. This, I believe, is a very strong accusation to legal proprietaries in general. This causes me to understand that freedom, rights, and values can be defined in many ways, depending on the individual’s views and place of influence. I believe Neuwirth’s best contribution is the different stories he obtained by immersing himself in each place. Understanding that so many people move, every day, questions can be asked. Are cities becoming an extension of the people’s practices on their rural lands? Are cities, or particular areas in cities, actually really dense settlements of rural people and rural land practices? And, if so, how is this evidenced?”

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I believe that Neuwirth finds his answers within the personal stories of the squatters. I might ask him: How are the favelas from Brazil different from the squatter settlements found in Nairobi, Kenya and those in Turkey? And, what do they have in common? I do not know exactly what his answer would be, but I would assume that he would not even mention the physical aspects of the places. Rather, he would pass on knowledge about the lives, the survival mechanics, and shared aspirations of these communities. He places himself as a minority in all these locations because, well, he is the minority. Even though, I personally might have doubts towards his views (not being a squatter himself) in each squatter settlement in which he resided, I believe he makes a great contribution by revealing a general aspect that unifies and identifies squatters, which is the way they view the land. Neuwirth states: “Rather the treating land as an economic value, squatters live according to a more ancient notion: the idea that every person has a natural right, simply by virtue of being born, to have a home, a place, a location in the world.” 24 This very much reminded me of Mrs. Emilia when I first started asking her questions about her land in the city. My questions had economics written all over but for Mrs. Emilia, it was all about survival and having the right to own something just because she is Panamanian and she had resided long enough in the city to deserve it. This statement helped me understand Neuwirth’s responsibility in understanding and learning from the squatter’s way of looking at the world, the places they reside, and life. Which also makes me wonder about my interest and responsibility towards the places I have been studying. What can I learn from them? And, what is my responsibility in studying the informal settlements of Panama?

Ashenafi Gossaye: Addis Ababa: In Progress or Crisis?

Environment: Addis Ababa - Ethiopia
World View: He sees a disparity in certain opinions and wishes to address them in an objective manner.

Personal Insight on Ashenafi Gossaye’s presentation:

“Each observer makes sense of a city and creates his own image, though the type of image one creates about a place varies depending on the depth and quality of the information one has.” 25

There are usually many similarities among cities of the developing world, so in order to understand the roots of the growing informality we need to understand the facts, the history and how it became too much to bear. The elite of cities like Addis Ababa or Panama City are trying very hard to keep up with more developed nations but the mechanisms that might make them slightly similar are just giant screens of ephemeral luxury covering a reality even their citizens want to ignore. Like Ashenafi Gossaye states: “I contend that the emergence of few high-rise buildings here and there and the opening of some roads do not reflect the claimed rapid development and the real image of the city.”26 Like Addis Ababa, Panama City is also suffering the same symptoms. Panama is a country in which history has been made through a commerce of service, being the best example: The Panama Canal. It is because of this wonder of the modern world that we have managed to maintain a level of economy that is above most of our Central America neighbors. Nonetheless, because of poor distribution of funds and the lack of visionary politicians the city is now suffering the largest health, education and basic infrastructure service drawback in history. There is so much money and effort being

invested in tourism and commerce for the foreign elite that no one seems to care about
the consequences of not improving the basic services. A massive migration took place
for the construction of the Panama Canal at the end of the 1800’s. People not only came
from rural areas of the country but also from other countries like, Jamaica and China.
One can still find evidence of informal settlements created by these immigrants when
the construction ended and the city could not manage to sustain them or send them
back. Now Panama City is getting ready to built a third set of locks for the Panama Canal
and there is a great need for human labor. Will the story repeat itself? How is a city that
is not investing or providing the basics for the well-being of its inhabitants going to be
able to deal with the consequences of a new massive migration event? Where are people
going to settle before, during and after the expansion is over? In a conversation I had
with Ashenafi Gossaye he mentions how in Ethiopia men move from their villages to the
city to work and live in very poor, informal settlements until they have earned enough
money to move out and bring back their families. I want to find out what are the
migratory patterns of people that move into the city of Panama. Does the family move
all together? Would my timing in Panama coincide with a change in these patterns now
that the city needs workers for the enlargement of the Panama Canal?
Fig. 2.2 Map of the Design Review Profiles.

List of Design Profiles

0.1 **MMA Architects**: *Sandbag Houses.*
0.2 **Marjectica Potrc**: *Dry Toilet.*
0.3 **Hector LaSala**: *Small Bench.*
0.4 **Rural Studio**: *Lucy’s House.*
0.5 **Gabriela Valencia**: *Provisional Clinic.*
Design Reviews

MMA Architects: Sandbag Houses.

Environment: Cape Town - South Africa.
World View: They are thankful to other’s prejudiced views and are not discouraged. It is viewed as an advantage.

Luyanda Mphahlwa and Mpheti Morojele are principals in the South African firm MMA Architects. Having little choice as designers, due mainly to prejudice, the firm started taking a number of government commissioned projects, including embassies in Berlin and Addis Ababa. This type of work introduced them to rather unconventional and more humanitarian design work, something rarely approached by other firms in South Africa. They believe unconventional design work can be as satisfactory and have the same merit as conventional projects done by conventional architecture firms. Yet, they do not consider themselves necessarily unconventional. The 10x10 Housing Project was a chance to prove these views. As stated in an interview by Mphahlwa “there is a need to find creative ways to unlock the lack of involvement in this critical field of delivery.”

He argues that even with the government involvement, the housing problematic in cities like Cape Town is that it is being delivered by developers. It is the non-involvement of architects and urban planners that has set a drawback on the urban quality of life.

For the challenge Mphahlwa took on the task of not only providing an affordable housing design but also introducing an innovative structural system: EcoBeam. The design innovation is to construct a structure of timber beams that are linked by galvanized metal zig-zags. The space in between the beams is then in-filled with sandbags. The construction process is meant to be simple so that home-owners with the help of the local community can built the houses themselves. Currently MMA is using

volunteer help from local women in the community to finish the project. Using only minimal amounts of water and cement, and a scarce need of electricity, the entire house requires only one week to built.

“To be part of this project meant a lot in terms of making a significant contribution towards innovative, dignified solutions to the housing situation. I’m looking forward to seeing the final construction.”

Personal Insight on MMA Architects:

“We are trying to introduce the element of dignity in low-cost housing.”

Mphahlwa makes this statement in reference to good quality and decent homes that every person has the right to own no matter their social status. After reviewing the project and the journey that led these architects to design the Sandbag House, I came to the conclusion that ‘dignity’ is not only used as a reference to architectural aesthetics but more importantly applied as a means to dignify the users, typologies, spaces and contexts to produce an architectural piece that is at the end appropriate. Now I wonder, what does an architect like Mphahlwa consider appropriate? And, how is the community involved in choosing what is appropriate for them? Without insinuating any negative criticism, I carefully consider the involvement of architects in communities like Freedom Park and the execution of these type of designs for the poor. These Sandbag homes seem to be a success story, at least the first ten. But, why? I think one of the strengths of the design was being able to produce a piece that does not require skilled labor, allowing the involvement of every resident within the community and not outsiders.

In the end, I believe MMA Architects is trying to find balance between conventional and non-conventional architecture practices. Unfortunately, there are still many professionals that do not believe this type of social involvement to be part of the architecture field, without realizing that these communities usually give us the satisfaction of working for them but also with them.

Fig. 2.3: Local community women volunteering in the home’s construction.
Fig. 2.4: Image of a typical wall with ecobeam structure in-filled with sandbags.
Fig. 2.5: One of the houses in construction.
Fig. 2.6: A different view of the construction.
Fig. 2.7: A local resident positioning the sandbags.

All images courtesy of MMA architects.
Marjectica Potrc: Dry Toilet.

Environment: Caracas - Venezuela.
World View: She is driven by the belief that citizens are capable of improving their own lives. This influences the way she approaches design and intervention, that is through mutual participation.

Personal Insight on Marjectica Potrc:

As part of a process Marjectica Potrc calls “participatory design” she immersed herself for six months in el barrio La Vega of Caracas, Venezuela. Having previously researched several informal settlements in Caracas, this barrio became of interest since it had no access to the municipal water grid. As part of a series of community-based on-site projects she developed a “dry toilet” fabricated entirely from local materials which collects human waste and converts it to fertilizer.

“I mostly work with communities that live in territories that have broken away from the 20th-century ideology of progress,” Potrc has said. “This gives them the freedom to design things according to their own abilities and on their own scale. Their practices reveal a world that is constructed ‘from below.’”

I believe her interventions are humble and realistic. It seems as if her projects are trying to rethink the conventional relationship between infrastructure and architecture in real urban environments that desperately need sustainable and practical solutions. I coincide with Marjectica Potrc in her approach because I believe she is trying to help informal communities like La Vega by giving them architectural solutions to problems they have really no control over, in this case, no access to potable water from municipal authorities. Rarely does she intervene in aesthetics aspects. Rather, she explores cultural-building practices and tries to change them. She serves as a facilitator of sustainable tools that can improve people’s lives in those territories she mentions that are far away from the current ideology of progress.

Fig. 2.8: Partial view of La Vega community in Caracas.
Fig. 2.9: Image of the dry toilet designed by Marjetica Potrc.
Fig. 2.10: Image showing the toilet and the reserve tank that collects the waste.
Fig. 2.11: A closer view of the ‘dry toilet’ communal building.

All images courtesy of Marjetica Potrc’s online site.
Hector LaSala: Small Bench.

Environment: Lafayette, LA - United States.

World View: He believes in small contributions. For him even the smallest attempt to make a positive change can be very satisfactory.

“Listen, observe; identify the need of the people.”
Hector LaSala is the personality behind of the Design-Build Program Design on the Societal Battlefront. Situated at the University of Lousiana at Lafayette, the program required the involvement of architecture students for the master plan design of a homeless shelter and 17 associated projects. The project that launched this initiative came about when The Acadiana Outreach Center, a non-profit organization which assists homeless and persons in need, requested the help of the School of Architecture and Design to develop an overall space utilization plan and storage unit design. As LaSala came to discover later, the mere act of designing a small bench for the people to sit when they came to the Outreach Center, became the catalyst for a complete turnover of a community’s redevelopment. The careful and well-thought intervention of his first collaborative designs have improved the work environment immensely while addressing the urgent needs of the center.

Personal Insight on Hector LaSala:

“Small attempts can make a big difference.”

To me, his most significant contribution is showing us, with real constructed projects, that small acts lead to larger ideas. He also gave me the impression of being a very positive person, which I think in many ways contributes to his success. He talks about starting ‘small’ and having that ‘one project’ become the catalyst for the next. As we visited The Outreach Center site, everything he had previously mentioned about the projects made sense. There was that small bench that was designed and built to

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31 Data taken from a personal conversation with Hector LaSala (July, 2008).
32 Data taken from a personal conversation with Hector LaSala (July, 2008).
encourage interaction among people that came to the center. Among the small projects is a colorful path improved by the workers of the center with the help of the community, and a small amphitheater that had become a ‘need’ due to the many gatherings taking place outside the center. Nothing seemed misplaced, and even though he confesses some things were never really designed, all together it became like a small oasis in the middle of a considered disturbed neighborhood. He mentioned on several occasions that ‘people are willing to give, just as long as you give them the opportunity.’ Meaning that people are in favor of doing things for themselves as long as they feel welcome and are made participants.

LaSala has the support of the University as well as the center; so I wonder, how can one generate such success without this level of support? Through my research I will be proposing several small interventions seen on the final chapters of this thesis, and some things I would have liked to hear from him were more insights on his struggles with the community and how he managed to overcome difficult challenges. Did he really have to deal with the community’s approval if he initially had a green light for the project?
Reviews

Fig. 2.12: Image of the small bench that started all.
Fig. 2.13: Image of the Outreach Center.
Fig. 2.14: Image of the small amphitheater.
Fig. 2.15: View of the improved pathway, made by workers of the Center with the help of the surrounding residents.
Fig. 2.16: Image of Architect Hector LaSala and his small bench project.

All images by the author of this document.
Rural to Urban: Studying Informal Settlements in Panama

Rural Studio: Lucy’s House.

Environment: Mason’s Bend - Alabama, United States.

World View: “Everyone, rich or poor, deserves a shelter for the soul.”

Personal Insight on Rural Studio:

For me, Mason’s Bend is as informal and poor as it can get for any community located on the south-east states of the United States. Having visited the place, I was amazed at the many projects this small community had built with the support of the Rural Studio Outreach Projects. This was the place where the studio built its first house in 1994 and the second one in 1997. It is also home to one of the studio’s emblematic buildings: the community center-cum-chapel, built in the year 2000. From all the projects I saw, Lucy’s House stood out, especially due to the twisting tornado-shelter tower once meant to be the porch of the house. But also because I had never seen re-used-carpet walls. Finished in 2002, Lucy’s house is one of the projects that was started by Samuel Mockbee but finished by students of the Rural Studio. Sometimes the architect is careless about the design and on the contrary really trying to make a difference in someone’s life, and I think this is something that can be appreciated in this project. I admire Samuel Mockbee’s boldness to suggest Lucy Harris that she needed a new home. Not that she would ever oppose since she stated that her old home was “mighty cramped for her family of five.” I think the project is very responsive/matched to context (rural and southern), as well as sustainable. Although, I have to agree with some critics when they talk about the notorious tower, some even called it the ‘whacked-out tower.’ Lucy seems to love it and it does have justifiable function: to protect the family in case of a tornado. Like Samuel Mockbee’s successor, Andrew Freear mentions, “the overwrought, crumpled tower most likely reflects students’ desires to make ‘more architecture.’” Andrew Frear believes Samuel Mockbee probably would have made the tower simpler, which makes you wonder about the importance of aesthetics versus function in projects which are mostly concerned with stressing community service.

Reviews

Fig. 2.17: Image of Lucy's House located at Mason's Bend in Hale County, Alabama.
Fig. 2.18: Image of the front facade and carpet wall detailing.
Fig. 2.19: Close-up image of the re-used carpet wall.

All images by the author of this document.
Gabriela Valencia: Provisional Clinic.

Environment: Buenos Aires, Argentina.

World View: My views are very much related to the way society interacts. I am curious about the functionality of society as we know it. But, do we really understand it? I am doubtful about architecture as a profession but not discouraged.

As part of a studio project we were asked to choose an informal community and propose a minor intervention to the place. The places included, but not limited to Istanbul and Delhi to Buenos Aires. Since I had previously been to Buenos Aires, I decided to take on the challenge of providing something to one of the oldest informal settlements in the city: Villa 31. Referred to by many in the capital as Villa Miseria 31 (Misery Villa 31), the settlement has been established for many years in the old neighborhood of Retiro, which is also the name of the train/bus station located south of the Villa. From the many problems found in the community I became interested in two issues I thought I could alleviate together. As I researched about the place online I found some videos of people complaining about the lack of health services in the area. It is estimated that three-thousand families (approximately fourteen thousand people) live in Villa 31, all in need of good health services. Another issue was the expulsion of the ‘carritos’. A type of informal commerce on wheels which brings and sells different types of products to the residents but at a lower price. I had many doubts about how to approach the intervention because I felt I had no real knowledge of the place; so how could I propose anything? I thought about cheap structures and multifunctional outdoor spaces and came up with the concept of reusing leftover shipping containers, probably abandoned at the train station or close to the river port. The five containers would provide a space for doctors to come on different days of the week and perform general medical examinations. In the afternoon the containers would provide a shaded space for the ‘carritos,’ that way creating an environment that would encourage the community to come together. I struggled to keep developing the project because I felt I required more information about the place, the people, and their needs. I believe no real or long term intervention can really be successful without immersing in the place of study.
Fig. 2.20: Site Plan of the area and proposed open space for the clinic.
Fig. 2.21: Image of the proposed building.
Fig. 2.22: Another view of the building and the external shaded area.

All images made by the author of this document.
Rural to Urban: Studying Informal Settlements in Panama

**Glossary:** Key Words/Definitions from the Architects and Literature

| **Development** | Depending on one’s politics and ideology: Development is a term which could be used to define or measure economic growth, rights, freedom..., livelihoods, good governance, knowledge, power - all which are often interspersed with words like ‘integration,’ ‘sustainability,’ ‘empowerment,’ ‘partnership,’ ‘participation,’ ‘community,’ ‘democracy,’ or ‘ethics.’ |
| **Emergence** | Scientists define it as the ability to organize and become sophisticated, to move from one kind of order to another higher level of order. |
| **Field of Delivery** | How Luyanda Mphahlwa refers to the architecture profession. |
| **Gecekondu** | House built in one night in Turkish language. |
| **Intra-Community/Inter-Community** | The way Kalpana Sharma referred in her book to the clashes between different communities of immigrants in Dharavi before the riots of 1992-1993. “The clashes among the communities were intra-community and not inter-community.” Inside Dharavi and not among the different cultural groups. |
| **Oda** | Name given to every room in the Gecekondu home. The spaces are not called living room, dining room, bathroom, or bedroom but do-it-all rooms, all at the same time. |
| **Public Character** | Anyone who is in frequent contact with a wide circle of people and who is sufficiently interested to make himself a public character. A public character needs to have no special talents. |
| **Slumming** | Referenced in Rediscovering Dharavi as one of the origins of the word ‘slum’ denoting informal, unhygienic housing. |
| **Urban Poor** | Is the way Kalpana Sharma referred to people living in Dharavi. |
Panama has always been a crossing path. The first Spanish colonization of the continent’s main land took place on the Atlantic side. But it was not until the European discovery of the Pacific Ocean in 1513, that Panama City was founded. This important discovery confirmed that Panama was in fact an isthmus (and the shortest path of the continent), turning the new city into the center of power of the Pacific and changing forever the strategy of occupation and control of America territory.\(^{37}\) From the early crossing path created by the Spaniard - The Royal Route - to the construction of the Transisthmian Railroad and the Panama Canal, from Colon City on the north side and Panama City on the south side, the country has always been considered a port. During the Gold Rush era for example, Panama was a real (and violent) boomtown where money flowed, land speculation was big business and bar and entertainment centers abounded, but where there was no great investment in the quality of life or in infrastructure.\(^{38}\)

For each one of the country’s productive and lucrative eras, the city filled up with immigrants from different nations: Spain, Portugal, Italy, Greece, Jamaica, United States, Japan, China. Some left, others stayed to work and live informally as residents until they could earn enough to go back. Those who could not afford much resided in tenement

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37 Eduardo Tejeira Davis, *Panama City’s Old Quarter*, (Sevilla; Panama: Editorial Bilingue, 2005), 26.
38 Eduardo Tejeira Davis, *Panama City’s Old Quarter*, (Sevilla; Panama: Editorial Bilingue, 2005), 36.
houses, usually located near by the large construction sites - Panama’s railroad or canal - on the east side of city and east of the man-made water cut that divided the country. The Canal Zone, which covered about 1,400 km², existed until 1979 and was practically a separate country that influenced life in Panama in a manner difficult to imagine today. The initial limits of the Canal Zone completely cut off Panama City from the rest of the country, as it went right up to the sea. In 1915, however, a corridor was opened allowing a fan-shaped expansion towards the north and northeast. This allowed for residents of the old city (which had become extremely crowded) to search for new and bigger lands and establish new peri-urban areas. The displacement of the old city center (the “Old City Quarter”), and with this, urban expansion, mainly to the north, east and west of the city, is a phenomenon that began in the 1960s, when the Old City Quarter had 40% of the total population, while the northern areas (San Miguelito, Las Cumbres and Chilibre) east (Juan Díaz, Pedregal, and Tocumen, Pacora) and west (Arraiján district and the most urbanized district of La Chorrera), housing, overall, less than 25%. These proportions vary dramatically in the span of 30 years, and in 1990 in the Old City Quarter was only 10% of the metropolitan population, whereas the three peri-urban areas were home to more than two thirds of the city’s inhabitants. View Figure 3.1.

Although the city began expanding rapidly after 1915, it was not until early 1970s, continuing to the late 1980s, that huge migratory events became increasingly prevalent. Until this point, most of the migratory events occurred within the city’s urban center. One of the well-registered factors that contribute to this intense mobilisation of rural inhabitants to the city, had its origins in the profound transformations that had affected the agricultural and cattle raising industries. These people came from western regions of the country - Los Santos and Veraguas province - and were mainly dedicated to cultivating the land or destroying it to raise cattle. This intense migration from this area of the country was categorized by a scientist in Panama as the “colonizacion espontanea interiorana - spontaneous rural colonization.” This rural colonization is considered one of the most significant social phenomena of contemporary Panama and it has its roots in the colonization of vast areas of land to raise cattle and grow crops to satisfy the country’s growing national markets, as a

39 Eduardo Tejeira Davis, Panama City’s Old Quarter, (Sevilla; Panama: Editorial Bilingue, 2005), 36.
40 Ministry of Housing, Urban Development Plan of the Pacific and Atlantic Metropolitan Areas.
41 Stanley Heckadon Moreno and Alberto McKay, Colonizacion y Destructcion de Bosques en Panama - Destruction and Colonisation of Forests in Panama, (Panama), 18.
consequence of the global political conjuncture - the worldwide debt crisis of the late 1970s and the subsequent IMF-led restructuring of “Third World” economies in the 1980s. These immigrants moved in two directions: those who had enough money to acquire more lands, moved further north to the Caribbean coasts. Others simply moved to the City in search of job opportunities, settling mainly in areas located outside of the urban center, like San Miguelito. This is one phenomenon that contribute to the formation of several informal settlements in the city during the early ‘80s.

Besides this internal migratory phenomenon, there are other reasons that contributed to the proliferation of informal settlements in Panama City. Most of these events occurred within the City and in different periods, but they all are highly connected to the creation of what is referred by the common citizen as ‘barriadas brujas,’ which is synonymous of the gecekondu phenomenon or ‘house built in one night’ for the Turkish.

The first registered informal settlements in Panama City were located along the Pacific coast line (two of which are part of the thesis case studies: Boca La Caja and Panama Viejo) and in the 1950s the city governor made efforts to relocate them away from the coast, to an area that is now immersed in San Miguelito District. They resisted, so the once designated land of relocation became abandoned, resulting in the creation of another self-built neighborhood. Meanwhile, the residents from these settlements on the coast are still there, making them the oldest registered informal community in the city. Also, during the 1960s the tenement houses, that constituted the bulk of popular housing for Panama City and Colon City, began rapidly deteriorating. This put the government in a state of urgency to build and relocate the population. Like most of the previous attempts, these inhabitants were relocated to northern areas of Panama City where there were vast areas of land on which to construct. Many of these lands were left for future development but became invaded before any plans were put in action. “The other side of the state action was the massive construction of popular housing, especially during the years 1973-1983, when more than 20,000 homes built in Panama City, of which about half were concentrated in San Miguelito. Then and now, the area of greatest concentration of informal housing in the City”.

43 Ministry of Housing. Urban Development Plan of the Pacific and Atlantic Metropolitan Areas of Panama.
44 Ministry of Housing. Urban Development Plan of the Pacific and Atlantic Metropolitan Areas of Panama.
Fig. 3.1: Map of Panama’s Metropolitan Area.

- **A** Panama Canal cut
- **B** Special area of critical urban growth
- **C** Old City Quarter
- **D** Northern urban expansion
- **E** Eastern urban expansion
- **F** Western urban expansion
- **G** Location of Calzada Larga

Division between east and west of the city.
Location of new settlements like Calzada Larga.
Location of the city’s commercial center.
Settlements: San Miguelito, Las Cumbres, and Alcalde Diaz.
Settlements: Juan Diaz, Pedregal, Tocumen, and Pacora.
Settlements: Arraijan, and La Chorrera.

E, D, F and G are considered peri-urban areas. They are mainly used as dormitories.
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<td>3,300,000</td>
<td>Total population of Panama in 2008. (i)</td>
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<td>Number of informal settlements in the City. (ii)</td>
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<i>(i) National Bureau of Statistics of Panama, 2008.</i>
<i>(ii) Panama’s Ministry of Trade and Industry, 2008.</i>
<i>(iii) Monetary amount: US Dollar ($).  
(ii) Area: Square miles.</i>
<i>(iv) The Panama Canal Authority Report, 2006.</i>

Fig. 3.2: Image of Panama City’s skyline.
From West to East: Rural to Urban

To talk about west versus east in Panama is also to talk about the rural versus the urban. The previously mentioned strategic position of Panama City (and Colon City) has its reasonings in the historical colonization of the continent, and in more recent decades in the search for commercial control by different nations, making the Panama Canal the clear ‘tangible’ division between the two areas. The existence of different indigenous groups located close to Colombia should be enough to consider this side of the country rural. But it is the social, economical, architectural, and historical conditions of the west that characterizes this influential part of the country as rural. Most of our cultural traditions have their origins in the central provinces of the isthmus - Azueros peninsula and Veraguas province. Since these regions were colonized by the Spaniards and kept isolated from the immigration boom of Colon and Panama City, they were able to develop and maintain their authentic practices for years. This is why these places are considered, by many Panamanians, as the cradles of our culture.

When referring to Panamanian architecture, educated elites say that architecture in Panama is never ‘Panamanian enough,’ and that it is influenced greatly by what is being done in other parts of the world. Many suggest that Panama City is the Miami of Central America or the Singapore. Then, what is Panama’s real architecture, if not this? Darien Montañes a Panamanian architect says ‘it is difficult to find valid alternatives to this question; and nobody seems to be bold enough to propose the return of the ‘quincha’ or ‘penca’ (bungalow or thatch) structure.’ Is it the easiness with which we yield to foreign influences (and it is not only limited to architecture) which gives us an approximate definition of Panamanian architecture? Is it a rich and complex architecture, variant and ductile, loaded with references, and impossible to type-cast or characterize if not by other reason than for its inconsistency? 45

The origins of Panamanian architecture are firmly established in the foreign. And although Panama is not considered a country that has a distinctive and well-recognized

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architectural typologies that can be referred as traditional Panamanian construction. From our Spanish influence to our Caribbean heritage, Panama City is a mix of contrasting edifications. And in gratitude to the current foreign real-state boom influencing the market, these construction typologies are bound to be found only within the informal self-builders residing in the City, old and new.

What is being informally built in the peripheries of the City is sometimes greatly linked to the place of origin of those who migrate and establish themselves in these areas. And even if they migrated years ago, they might still retain their rural sensibility. But, how? Many now established urban residents, like Mrs. Emilia, do not show their rural past through personal appearance but rather through their building culture. For example, it should be an obvious fact that Caribbean natives mostly live of the sea and rarely require large portions of land to grow their food. They are accustomed to living elevated from the ground to prevent being swept away by strong waves or high ocean tides. Their homes are made out of wood, with large balconies, high roofs, and elevated from the ground, and they seem to have no problem with having one home beside the other. These is the case of the wood tenement homes built for the construction of the Panama Canal that were mostly inhabited by black workers from the Antilles Islands of the Caribbean. Mrs Emilia on the other hand, coming from a region mainly inhabited by indigenous groups, would probably have a hard time adjusting to living in a Caribbean home. She is used to growing her own crops, cooking outside and having her toilet apart from the main house, consequently she needs the land. It is these architectural typologies that define and characterize many of the environments within the informal settlements of Panama City. Three places are used as an example and comparison of the origins of the main architectural typologies found within its informal settlements.
1 Colon Island: Caribbean Typology
This typology makes reference to the Antilles architecture or Franco-Caribbean, which was mainly characterized by high roofs, large openings, surrounding galleries, and shaded balconies. One of the most representative features of this architecture in Panama is the construction of the home on top of columns to allow air to circulate but also to protect it from the ocean. This typology can be found along the northern coast of Panama.

2 Sona: Indigenous Typology
There are several indigenous typologies in Panama but many immigrants found in the City come from the central regions of the country, especially Veraguas province which is the location of the town called Sona. Most of these groups depend on large portions of land to grow crops and construct their homes. Their houses are characterized by having closed and open spaces for resting and living, while separating the kitchen and toilet from the main structure.

3 Chitre: Spanish Typology
This typology appeared before the Caribbean architecture and is part of Panama’s Spanish heritage. It is mainly characterized by having internal courtyards, high roofs, and front galleries. These galleries are a very important aspect of the design, always being oriented to the east to bring sunlight in the early morning and shade in the afternoon, when it is mainly used for community gatherings. This typology can be found in the central provinces and it is the most common construction among the informal builders.

Fig. 3.4, 3.5, 3.6: Images of the typologies in the places of origin: Colon Island, Sona, and Chitre. 3.7, 3.8, 3.9: Images of informal constructions in the City representing each typology.
Panama

Government Tenure

“Turkey has two notable laws that give squatters legal and political rights, and thus the chance to build permanent communities. If Turkey’s legal system were in place in all the countries I visited, squatters would be in much better shape around the world.”

ROBERT NEUWIRTH

Since 1991 Panama has a Program of Measurement and Legalization of informal settlements and it has managed to legalize approximately 120 settlements of the 295 found within the Province of Panama. So, does this mean that our squatters are in better shape, compared to the ones found in other nations? Well, I can not really speak for the rest of the world, but as I read stories from places like Mumbai, Nairobi, and Lagos I realized that our so called precaristas and invasores seem to have certain political advantages, rights, and survival mechanics that I had assumed were normal or common among most of the informal world.

Panama is relatively a small country when referring to the population and comparing it to other nations in Latin America. Consequently, the issue of handling informal settlements in the City was something that according to the architect Ricardo Delgado: ‘we could really manage to organize and give everybody a chance. And, that is what we have been doing since 1991.’ I met Ricardo Delgado in September of 2008 when he was the director of the Department of Informal Settlements, a small department within Panama’s Housing Ministry. Right away he informed me that it was going to be very hard for me to find recent invaded areas because the current government had put a stop to invasion (this government has been in charge since 2004). ‘As soon as they see one person on an empty land they would evict them.’ He said that first, there are not that many people coming to settle informally to the City anymore, most of them have someone they can stay with until they find a place (a relative or a friend), so it is easy

to evict one family rather than a large group of invaders. And secondly, the real state boom has former and current land owners fighting for their land rights because they want to sell them to the next big investor that comes around. ‘And, we can not really take away their rights and give the land to the invaders.’ He implies that they can do more for the already ‘recognized’ settlements if they avoid more invasions. He says: ‘the program has been a success, but we still have a long way to go in order to legalize all the informal settlements.’ The main objective of the program is first, to legalize the current tenancy of the informal settlements. Secondly, to improve the urban development of each settlement. And last, to fortify family bonds in relation to their habitat status. I will now describe the conversation I had with the architect. This will later help to compare views with Mrs. Emilia’s story revealed in Chapter Four.

Note on conversation: I had first met with Mrs. Emilia so many questions done to the architect are based on answers and assumptions drawn from that previous encounter.

**Gabriela:**  I heard that housing authorities recommend informal settlers not to build permanent homes quickly, but instead to build them out of temporary materials?

**Ricardo:** This is not true. In fact we encourage settlers to build permanently because this helps us measure and legalize faster. The ones who usually tell settlers this are district governors or local authorities who are not sure of the land rights so they advise not to build permanently in case they get evicted.

**Gabriela:** But, how are they sure they will not get evicted? How do you assure the land?

**Ricardo:** Well, like I mentioned, we do not have the problem of large invasions in the City anymore. Now is mostly a matter of making sure the land is owned by the government so we can apply the Measurement and Legalization Program. If the land has private owners we make arrangements to buy the land from them, but it usually takes a while because we always buy at lower values, since we will not use the land to gain profits.

**Gabriela:** Is it true that new settlers have to build their home in two days?

**Ricardo:** Well, this is true. We have what we call the ‘48-hour rule.’ If a person comes to the Housing Ministry asking for a place to settle what we do is
Panama
give them a piece of land and ask them to build a temporary structure. If they manage to do it, we know they really needed a place to live, if they do not, the land is taken from them. Also, many of the lands we give away have not yet been properly measured so we can not allow them to build permanently until we have done so. It is part of the program. Only if the land is legal can they build permanently.

Gabriela: Do most of them follow this rule and its requirements?
Ricardo: Well, yes. But we always have cases of people who just do not understand our work. We are trying to help them. They just want to be smarter than everybody else. We tell them to give us a chance to organize. An organized piece of land is worth much more. Maybe not away, but we tell them that if we are able to organize, in the future they will be able to have all the necessary infrastructure.

Gabriela: I see. Which would you say are your most problematic areas right now?
Ricardo: I would say we have two problematic areas. One is located just outside of Colon City, but it is not part of Panama City. People are just trying to settle outside of Colon City because it is in very bad shape and insecurity is a big issue. Another very problematic area is the oldest settlement within Panama City: Boca La Caja. We can not get into an agreement with the residents and you should know, since it is located right on the coast line, at $4,000 per square meter the owners want to sell the land for development. But those people have been there since the 1940s. They own it now.

Gabriela: And, in which area have you been able to apply the program from the beginning?
Ricardo: Definitely, the former reverted areas of the Panama Canal bases located on the west side of the City. Even if not every land has property rights, they are all organized just waiting to be invaded. We have traced dirt roads with the required measures and virtually divided lands. We have been working with that area since 1994.

Gabriela: Can I still find new invaders in Panama City?
Ricardo: Well, there are some land invaders we have found are moving to the old flight runway of Calzada Larga. But they are not rural immigrants, they are people from San Miguelito who can not find new land to built so they are moving north of the City.
Fig. 3.10 to 3.15: Photographs of Calzada Larga.
The newest invaded lands of Panama City.
Note: it is located on area B (Area of critical urban growth) of Fig. 3.1.
### Glossary of the Informal

In the World:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Country</th>
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<tr>
<td>Çeçekondu</td>
<td>Turkey</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kiji</td>
<td>Kenya</td>
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<td>Johpadpatti</td>
<td>India</td>
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<td>Liudong Renkou</td>
<td>China</td>
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<td>Arrabal</td>
<td>Puerto Rico</td>
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<td>Villas Miseria or</td>
<td>Argentina</td>
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<td>Villas de Emergencia</td>
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<td>Colonias de Paracaidistas</td>
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<td>Favelas</td>
<td>Brazil</td>
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<td>Barrios</td>
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<td>Pueblo Joven</td>
<td>Peru</td>
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<tr>
<td>Asentamiento</td>
<td>Guatemala</td>
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<tr>
<td>Barriadas Piratas or Tugurio</td>
<td>Colombia</td>
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</tbody>
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In Panama:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Barriada Bruja</td>
<td>Appears from one day to another. ‘Ghost neighborhood.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asentamiento Espontáneo</td>
<td>Informal Settlement. Term used by housing officials.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Invasor</td>
<td>Invader of land. Used when they first arrive to the land.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Precarista</td>
<td>Invader that has built on the land.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barriada</td>
<td>Common name given to a formed settlement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>El Interior</td>
<td>Refers to the rural areas.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La ciudad</td>
<td>Refers to Panama City.</td>
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</tbody>
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Rural to Urban: Studying Informal Settlements in Panama

Precarista Mechanics

Note: The information provided was taken from two different women who migrated from the rural and settled in Panama City approximately 30 years ago. They rented or lived with relatives in the City until they were able to request a portion of land from the government and construct their own place. One of the women is Mrs. Emilia.

Who asks for the land?
The land is either invaded by an entire family or requested. The majority of the land requests are made by women. They do not invade by themselves.

Who builds the permanent home?
Usually a neighbor who happens to be a skilled builder. These men build in both environments: the formal and the informal.

Who builds the first temporary home?
If it is a family settling, it is the man (head of the family) who constructs the structure. If it is a woman who acquires the land, either a male relative or companion will help her build.

How long until they build a permanent home?
That depends on each individual settler and his or her income. It is recommended by the government authorities that they build permanent when they have had the land measured and registered with the Housing Ministry.

Fig. 3.16: Image of an informal settlement in the City showing temporary and permanent buildings.
**What about the building techniques?**
So many people have done temporary structures before them that they take on the same pattern and replicate the building. The most common materials are wood and metal sheets that they use for closure and roofing. The frame structure is made out of wood and they use found concrete blocks to place on the roof, that way they keep the corrugated sheets from flying away.
For the permanent home the common used material is concrete blocks and ornamental blocks for the openings. The roof structure now has metal beams.

**Where do they get the materials?**
Most materials are obtained from the national dump. Corrugated metal sheets and leftover wood are abundant there.

**How do they transport the materials?**
If the person does not have their own means of transportation then a friend, relative or companion will help. It can not be done without an automobile.

Fig. 3.17: Image of an informal settlement in the City showing the materials used for temporary and permanent buildings.
What about the basic infrastructure?
Paved roads are basically non-existent, except maybe for the main access road. Electricity is usually the first thing provided and residents are required to have meters and start paying right away for the service. Water is rarely a service provided to each home. Small PVC pipes are connected to the main source to fill-up reserve tanks. Sometimes water just does not come for days. Sanitary infrastructures are non-existent, it is the last thing to ever be provided, so each individual settler handles their waste in different ways.

Would they ever get all the necessary infrastructure?
Informal communities get more attention close to the election periods so they manage to obtain benefits in exchange for votes. Some areas now have all the necessary infrastructure but it takes years for that to happen.

Security issues?
Everyone in the community knows who owns what area but fencing is not the biggest concern in temporary permanent locations. They will fence when they acquire valuable items. Insecurity is something they learn to live with.

Fig. 3.18: Image of an informal settlement in the City showing a temporary structure.
4 Unfamiliar Encounter

Fig. 4.1: Map of Mrs. Emilia’s journey.

- 1979 Mrs. Emilia migrates to Panama City: She resides in informal Mañanitas, San Miguelito.
- 1984 Mrs. Emilia rents a room in La Chorrera, west side of Panama City.
- 1985 Mrs. Emilia moves to Panama Viejo, a now legal informal settlement in the City.
- 1995 I meet Mrs. Emilia.
- 2001 Mrs. Emilia acquires a piece of land in Valle de Urraca, San Miguelito.
Knowing Mrs. Emilia

“I tell my husband that I believe I could be in better shape when it comes to money if I would go back to my land in the rural. But I wanted to come to the City. I am from the City now.”

MRS. EMILIA

I have known Mrs. Emilia for thirteen years, and never had I learned so much about her life than in the past five months. It makes me wonder about how my family and I felt so comfortable having her in our lives everyday thinking we knew who she is. The truth is, that familiarity we thought we had made her story very unfamiliar. I do believe I have to be blamed for not knowing. She always talks about her life, but I guess once she walks out the front gate of our home, we care, but we do not brainstorm on her journey home, or what she will eat, or if it rains maybe her house will flood. And probably we never really did the effort to envision her home the way she described it. To say that I know Mrs. Emilia is an understatement, and more so the place in which she resides.

When I first approached Mrs. Emilia about my thesis topic, I thought she was the perfect ‘trustworthy’ source. She was from the rural, she had migrated to Panama City, worked, and established herself in an informal settlement. As it turns out, her story revealed much more about how informal settlers survive in different environments and situations than demonstrating her rural sensibility. For her, it was more important that I finally heard the story and what she had overcome so she could proudly show me her land, her home, her place in the City.

Mrs. Emilia Sanchez
Age: 39
Place of Birth: El Guarumal (Sona), Veraguas Province
Age she migrated: 11
Children: 4
First job in the City: House maid
Lives with: 13 year old daughter, Yari

47 Personal conversation with Mrs. Emilia, September 2008.
**Unfamiliar Encounter**

Conversation with Mrs. Emilia, September 2008:

**Gabriela:** What part of ‘el interior’ (the rural) are you from?
**Mrs. Emilia** I am from Sona. From Veraguas Province.

**Gabriela:** How long would it take to travel from Panama City to Sona?
**Mrs. Emilia** Let’s just say, if we were to leave the City around 9:30 in the morning, we should be there by 1:30 in the afternoon.

**Gabriela:** What year did you come to Panama City?
**Mrs. Emilia** Around 1979.

**Gabriela:** Why did you come to the City?
**Mrs. Emilia** Because I wanted to work.

**Gabriela:** But couldn’t you find any work in Sona?
**Mrs. Emilia** Well, I really wanted to come to the City.

**Gabriela:** But if you wanted, you would have been able to find work in Sona?
**Mrs. Emilia** Yes, but not very good ones.

**Gabriela:** And back in Sona, you still lived with your parents?
**Mrs. Emilia** Yes, it was their house.

**Gabriela:** Are your parents from Sona?
**Mrs. Emilia** Well, my dad was from Cañazas, Veraguas province and my mom was from Cerro Plata also located in Veraguas.

**Gabriela:** And why did they establish in Sona?
**Mrs. Emilia** Because my dad left his home very young to start working but it came to a point when he wanted to reside in one place and he found a land he could buy in Sona, which is our land now.

**Gabriela:** And what did your dad do with the land?
**Mrs. Emilia** He cultivated. Agriculture and cattle raising.

**Gabriela:** Who built the home you lived in Sona?
**Mrs. Emilia** My dad did.

**Gabriela:** What was it made of?
**Mrs. Emilia** It was made out of wood and the roof was made of thatch.

**Gabriela:** Was that the typology of every house made?
**Mrs. Emilia** Yes, we mostly use wood, sugar canes and thatch.

**Gabriela:** Do you think the house still has the same original materials?
Mrs. Emilia: I think so. We had two homes, one was used to sleep and the other was used for cooking and storage.

Gabriela: Were there many houses built that way?

Mrs. Emilia: In the place I lived called Guarumal yes. In Sona people used wood but also metal sheets. It was rare to see thatch roofs.

Gabriela: You always tell me you consider yourself to be poor and humble. Did you and your family feel the same way when you were in Sona?

Mrs. Emilia: Well yes. But I now believe I had more in Sona than here in the City. Back in Sona I had the means to sell and earn money with my dad’s cattle and agriculture business. I can not sell anything in the City, only work for money.

Gabriela: Where did you stay when you first arrived to the City?

Mrs. Emilia: When I came to the City I already had a job. My sister was here already so she managed to find me some work.

Gabriela: So you stayed with your sister?

Mrs. Emilia: No, I stayed with my aunt. Back then she lived in Mañanitas, in San Miguelito.

Gabriela: How long did you stay there?

Mrs. Emilia: Not long, because in 1984 I got pregnant and had to move out and could not work anymore. So I rented a room from my mother in law.

Gabriela: Where did your mother in law live?

Mrs. Emilia: She lived in Chorrera, on the west side.

Gabriela: But I remember when you started working at our house that you lived somewhere close to the coast?

Mrs. Emilia: Yes. I only lived in Chorrera for a year. I then moved to Panama Viejo, close to the old city ruins. That house I stayed in belonged to my son’s father.

Gabriela: What year did you finally acquire your own piece of land?


Gabriela: And how did you manage to get this land?

Mrs. Emilia: At first I wanted to buy a temporary house that was already in place but I found out that it was violating the established property line. So I went to the Housing Ministry and told them my problem. What they did was relocate me in a new area but I had to built fast. It was Lot # 16.
Unfamiliar Encounter

Gabriela: How long did you have to build the house?
Mrs. Emilia: At the beginning they said I had only two days but asked them if it could be more because I did not have materials to build yet.

Gabriela: So they gave you more time?
Mrs. Emilia: Yes, they came to see Lot #16 two weeks later.

Gabriela: Where did you get the materials?
Mrs. Emilia: Well, I told my husband and we went to Cerro Patacon (which is Panama City’s national dump) and we bought some very cheap wood and corrugated metal sheets.

Gabriela: And you still have the house built with those same materials?
Mrs. Emilia: Oh yes! I still have half of the original structure because my new home does not have a roof yet.

Gabriela: Who helped you build it?
Mrs. Emilia: There was a man who was also from Veraguas province who lived close to Lot #6 and he helped us. We gave him some money, but it was not much.

Gabriela: Would I be able to enter your neighborhood and see your house? Is the area dangerous?
Mrs. Emilia: No, no, there are bad people and good people but where I live is safe. Some people there have better things than you and me.

After I had this conversation with Mrs. Emilia I visited her home twice. The first time I saw her place I was surprised. Not at the house or the area, I am use to seeing these type of neighborhoods and living conditions in Panama. I was stunned at Mrs. Emilia, and how for years she never complained about the place she lives in or the conditions of her house. From that moment on, my relationship with Mrs. Emilia became more complex because I felt I had lost all familiarity with her. I knew she needed the money to finish her permanent home, but it really felt like all she wanted to get out of that visit was my acknowledgement. She felt proud of having her place in the City and displaying it as her most valuable possession. She showed me her temporary house which she calls ‘la casa mientras tanto’ (the meanwhile house), because her real home is the one made out concrete blocks set right beside the temporary structure. Until this day she has not been able to gather enough money to finish the roof of her home. Me and my family had no idea she had been constructing her permanent home since 2004.
The Meanwhile House

**Fig. 4.2:** Site Plan of Mrs. Emilia’s Lot #16.

1. The Meanwhile House.
2. The permanent house.
3. Her bathroom.
4. Passerby control fence.
5. Approved land limit.
6. Her vegetable/fruit gardens.
7. Her neighbor’s house.
8. Route to other homes.
2 The Permanent House
According to Mrs. Emilia the only thing lacking in her permanent house is the roof. Once she has that build she will be able to move and tear down what is left of the meanwhile house. Building materials: concrete blocks, ornamental blocks for the openings and corrugated metal sheets for the roof (future).

6 Front Garden
Grows lime, bean, mandioca, avocado, and plantain.

1 The Meanwhile House
This is half of the original structure she built back in 2001. She took down part of the temporary structure to start building her permanent house. Currently the only service she pays is electricity, reason why she has installed an electric regulator. Building materials: Scavenged wood and corrugated metal sheets.

Fig. 4.3: Photograph of Mrs. Emilia’s temporary and permanent houses.
4 Control Fence
People used to walk through her land to access the road. She built a fence to avoid the situation.

3 Bathroom
Also a temporary structure.

1 The Meanwhile House
Rear View

2 The Permanent House

Fig. 4.4: Photograph of Mrs. Emilia’s backyard. On the photo: Mrs. Emilia.
7 The Neighbor’s House
This is Mrs. Emilia’s neighbor permanent house. For now she aspires to have her permanent home built this way.

Fig. 4.5: Photograph of Mrs. Emilia’s neighboring house.
3 Bathroom
This is also a temporary structure. Once her permanent home is finished she will build a new bathroom, which will also be located outside of the permanent house.

6 Garden
She uses every bit of land available to grow crops, which on many occasions are stolen by other residents in the area.

Fig. 4.6: Photograph of Mrs. Emilia’s bathroom.
Fig. 4.7 to 4.11: Photographs of Mrs. Emilia’s home.
Manuel and Lidia’s Story

“Not all urban poor, to be sure, live in slums, nor are all slum-dwellers poor.”
MIKE DAVIS 48

Manuel and Lidia are my parents, and they would probably agree with Mike Davis on this quote. They are considered middle-class, well-educated civilians. Like many, after years of living in an apartment, they decided to buy a house for their growing family. They chose a new developing sector that was at the end of Panama District and at the starting line of the fast-growing San Miguelito District. In 1986, they bought what they thought was a good deal. It was a three-bedroom, two-bathroom house with a nice backyard (something that my mom really wanted). This was the last set of residential neighborhoods developed at the outskirts of the hills that divided both districts. And by the time my parents acquired their residence, invaders were taking over the hill.

There were only a few scattered shanties on the hill when we arrived, my parents said. But once all of our neighborhood was completed the hill became a community. They knew these people were land invaders, but during this particular period, Panama was already under the military regimen of General Manuel Noriega, and little was being done about controlling the invasions. In fact, invasions were, essentially, allowed. My parents explain that between the years of 1985 and 1989 life was very unstable. ‘One did not know if work would still be available the next day, or even if it was safe to go out and buy food.” We were one of the last countries of Latin America to have a dictatorship regimen, and according to my parents these were some of the worst years in Panama’s history. It was complete chaos.

Most of what is San Miguelito today - a compilation of, now legalized, but former informal settlements, formed between 1985 and 1995 - is in part the result of a government’s paternalism to the poorest sectors of the population. This was all manipulated by the politicians, especially Nueve de Enero, my parents said. Nueve de Enero was the name given to the scattered-shanty-hill my parents saw develop. My parents said, “from the beginning we had a panoramic view of the hills, a panoramic view of the best and worst behaviors of a community we thought would never develop the way it did, but we learned to live with.”

I asked my parents if some government ever decided to bulldoze Nueva de Enero would they be against it. Both had contradicting opinions. My dad rushed to say ‘no,’ and my mom calmly said ‘yes.’ My dad being in favor of expulsion comes with the fact that for years the nearby neighborhoods have been ‘bullied’ by those who reside in Nueva de Enero. “We have been living in no-man’s-land since we got here. Always having to take care of what we bring home, what we buy, our own lives. We can not control their abuses and apparently the security officials just do not care.” My dad is aware that there are both well-hearted and bad-intentioned people residing this community, but there is no way to control their access so we will always be at a disadvantage. On the other hand, my mom sets a more realistic vision of what should be done rather than expelling them from their lands. She talks about regularizing the infrastructure services. “The main problem I see is that these people seem to have already better living conditions than we do. They do not pay for water or electricity because we pay that for them. If they are so stable as a community, they should be able to pay for the basic needs and not steal form us.” This is one major concern in most of the old, now legalized, informal settlements. The government recognizes them as formal neighborhoods, but more than fifty percent of the communities do not pay for basic services, although they are provided. It is the middle class resident who usually supports the system.

After a while of arguing about the negatives, my parents bring up some positiveness. My mom mentions that for years she has had women come and help her with the house, and many of them took care of me and brothers. I became close to some of these women, my mom said. My dad even mentions, that as veterinarian, he went several times into Nueva de Enero to give medical attention to animals. It was the neighbors in Nueva de Enero that came looking for him to help them. At the end, one can not say that even with all the negative aspects, the relationship between both communities has some advantages and if their is something my parents agree on is that it is better to have them as friends than enemies. “It is one of the struggles of living in countries like ours. You lose fear and you learn to live with it.”
5 Informal Settlement Cases

“From a design point of view, informality is a condition of complex, non-linear systems in which patterns overlap, intersect, and mutate in unexpected ways.”

Conceptual diagram networks are often used to define patterns of connections. In 1964, Paul Baran conceptualized a diagram of three types of networks: centralized, decentralized, and distributed, which is considered as one of the technological and conceptual milestones of the internet creation. The intention is to utilize these diagrams as a representation of each case in relation to the City center. This chapter contains five cases of informal settlements included within Panama’s Metropolitan area, each one represented as a network related to Panama City’s centralized urban structure. This centralized network culture defines many societal aspects of Panama’s population, which in many cases has contributed and continues to contribute to the creation of informal spaces. Some now, informally premeditated for the future.

Fig. 5.1: Image of Paul Baran’s networks. Panama City has a centralized network.

Panama City has a centralized network due mainly to the fact that most of the work areas are concentrated in Node A. People who reside in the center and also work there are few. Most of the work force comes from Node B and C, these are exclusive dormitories, where the great majority of the lower-middle and low class workers reside. In a city where effective service in public transportation is non-existent and the use of a vehicle is almost mandatory, the need of a more decentralized City has become an emergency. *View Appendix, page 96.*
Case 1: Boca La Caja (The Box Mouth, no specific name reasoning)

*Year of emergence: 1940
Location: Panama Center. Node A.
Population: 50 (30 families)
Area: Aprox. 137,505 sq. meters
Status: Limbo status due to real estate land conflicts.
Fact: Oldest registered informal settlement in Panama City.
Facilities: Water, electricity, sanitary installations, internet, transportation.
Concerns: Garbage recollection, security, land tenure.

Multiplaza Mall,
High class residential community.
Highly secured Jewish school.
Corredor Sur, mayor highway constructed over the coastline.

Fig. 5.3: Map of Boca La Caja location and limits.
The biggest issue with this community is that they are not willing to be relocated to peri-urban areas of the City. The government, as well as, private land owners want to use these lands to continue developing the coast line.

Oldest informal settlement in Panama City. Every residence is now a permanent building where all the necessary and basic services are provided.

There are major garbage recollection concerns among the community.

Fig. 5.4 to 5.9: Photographs of Boca La Caja.
**Case 2: Panama Viejo (Old Panama)**

*Year of emergence: Between 1945 and 1955*

**Location:** Periphery of Panama Center. Node A.

**Population:** 235 (47 families)

**Area:** Aprox. 477, 400 sq. meters

**Status:** Awaiting Legalization.

**Fact:** Informal settlement located beside the City’s oldest ruins.

**Facilities:** Water, electricity, sanitary installations, internet, transportation.

**Concerns:** Garbage recollection, security, land tenure, recreation spaces.

---

**Middle class legal neighborhood.**

Jardin de Paz, National Cemetery.

Coastline.

Panama City’s old archeological ruins. Second funded city on the Pacific coast.

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**Fig. 5.10:** Map of Panama Viejo location and limits.
This settlement is also one of Panama City’s oldest so all the structures are build with permanent materials and are provided with all the basic services and infrastructures. One of the main entrances of the settlement is located beside part of the old city’s archeological site. This site is constantly visited by tourists and archeologists. Kids use the left green space to play soccer.

The ruins date back to 1671 when the City was burned down by pirate Henry Morgan in his quest to steal all the gold that was to be transported to Spain. The City was then relocated west, what is today Panama City’s Old Quarter.

Fig. 5.11 to 5.16: Photographs of Panama Viejo.
Informal Settlement Cases

Case 3: Nueva de Enero (Nine of January, commemorated date)

* Year of emergence: Between 1985 and 1990
Location: Peri-urban areas. Node B.
Population: No data
Area: Aprox. 917,476 sq. meters
Status: Legalized.
Fact: Informal settlement located beside my house.
Facilities: Water, electricity, sanitary installations (some illegal).
Concerns: Garbage recollection, security, transportation, recreation spaces.

Middle class legal neighborhood.
Middle class legal neighborhood.
Middle class legal neighborhood.
San Miguelito District. Mostly informal settlements.

Fig. 5.17: Map of Nueva de Enero location and limits.
This settlement is partially permanent. One can still find temporary structures made with leftover materials.

A major concern in this community is their access facilities. Most of them enter through a legalized neighborhood, but this access has major security and sanitary issues.

Nueve de Enero is separated from the legalized community by a block wall built by the legal residents to avoid the illegal settlers to pass freely and steal services like electricity, cable TV, and internet.

Fig. 5.18 to 5.23: Photographs of Nueve de Enero.
**Case 4: Valle de Urraca** *(Urraca Valley, no specific name reasoning)*

*Year of emergence:* Between 1995 and 2000  
*Location:* Peri-urban areas, Node B.  
*Population:* 4,650 (934 families)  
*Area:* Approx. 759,066 sq. meters  
*Status:* Awaiting Legalization.  
*Fact:* Informal settlement where Mrs. Emilia resides.  
*Facilities:* Water (scarce), electricity, main road.  
*Concerns:* Security, transportation, sanitation, access roads.

Main access to Valle de Urraca.  
San Miguelito District - informal settlement.  
San Miguelito District - legal community.  
Predetermined for the future expansion of Valle de Urraca.

**Fig. 5.24:** Map of Valle de Urraca location and limits.
The major concerns in this settlement is access to water, sanitary infrastructures and roads. Many people fear having landslides when the rainy season begins.

This is considered one of the most recent settlements on the east side of Panama City’s Metropolitan area. Most of the structures are temporary, although one can start to see half built permanent homes.

Sanitary and health issues are a major concern in this community.

Fig. 5.25 to 5.30: Photographs of Valle de Urraca.
**Case 5: Los Laureles** *(The Laureles, no specific name reasoning)*

* Year of emergence: Created in 1999 (to be invaded)
* Location: Peri-urban areas - west side, Node C
* Population: Zero
* Area: Aprox. 191,130 sq. meters
* Status: Will be legalized when invaded.
* Fact: Informal settlement created for invasion. Not invaded yet.
* Facilities: Water, electricity, main road.
* Concerns: Transportation, sanitation, recreation areas.

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**Fig. 5.31:** Map of Los Laureles location and limits.
The following graph presents a summary of the settlements versus the major resources available in each one. The existence or lack of each resource was taken into consideration before proposing the minor interventions. Although major part of the available bibliography suggests that informal settlements should be approached and improved only at the infrastructure level and not by trying to satisfy each settler individually, no major change to the current status of each resource or facility will be developed in this thesis. Instead, this work proposes minor interventions that will serve as a platform to create interest and better understanding of each of these environments in the future.

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Fig. 5.32: Graphic showing the resources available to each informal settlement.

- ○ Exists or Provided
- □ Exists in certain areas or Provided to certain homes
- □ Non-existent or Not Provided
6 Design Interventions

“Pese a la fluidez de la información mundializada, no se divulgan los resultados de los que buscan soluciones plausibles para contextos inmersos en necesidades agobiantes.” (“Despite the global flow of information, we do not disclose the results of those seeking plausible solutions to contexts with overwhelming needs.”)  

Around the world there are many organizations with projects trying to find design solutions for ‘contexts with overwhelming needs.’ As many countries in Latin America, Panama is not excluded from having to deal with poverty, social inequity, and informality, but very little is mentioned in researches or literature of social approach about Panama City’s informal contexts. Several reasons, like for instance, having one of the smallest populations of the region, and for years having been overlooked as another territory heavily associated the United States have contributed to keep a low profile of Panama’s social issues throughout the concerning professionals. Nevertheless, those who reside and visit the country know that Panama should be far from excluded when it comes to providing information and proposing interventions about the informal settlements and their needs. The ten factors are meant to provide a summary of the most important needs found within each studied informal settlement (deduced from Fig. 5.32, page 82). At least one factor will be used as a diagnosis of what is needed in order to propose the design intervention. These interventions are used as a way of providing interest about each area and better understanding of how one can start immersing in these types of places, in this case, despite the success or failure of the proposed designs.

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51 Julian Salas Serrano, Arquitectura sin Aplausos = Architecture without Applause.
Case 1 Intervention: Boca La Caja

**Care for Waste Facility**

Being the oldest settlement in Panama City, it is most likely to be considered ‘established’ and ‘formal’ than others. Each and every house is provided with all the basic infrastructure resources. But still, this community has major issues with their management of inorganic waste. A year ago a group of local businesses got together to propose a competition to improve the recreational facility of Boca La Caja. Architecture students from the University of Panama designed and proposed a park with two gazebos for the community. Today, most of the area is being used as the ‘community dump’ (mainly bottles, paper, and cans). The concept behind the Care for Waste Facility is to propose an area close to one of the gazebos in which three permanent and small concrete dumps will be located to dispose of materials that can be recycled. The materials to be recycled would be: paper, glass, and aluminum, since these are the main materials recycled in Panama City. The common urban resident of Panama City is still very ignorant towards the topic of recycle and reuse, but that is mainly due to the lack of education on behalf of the authorities, and the scarce amount of facilities provided for the activity.

Location of Facility

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Fig. 6.1: Location of Recycling Facility in Boca La Caja settlement.
**Design Interventions**

**Case 1 Intervention: Boca La Caja**

Project Logistics: Money is given back to those who take bottles, cans and paper to recycle centers in the City (this is used as an income resource by the poorest inhabitants of the City). No one is the total owner of the installation. Nor is anyone from the community obligated to manage the facility. Nevertheless, the community should decide how the waste and profits will be distributed because they will not be able to depend on the City’s recycling centers for the recollection.

Site Plan, showing the existing gazebo and the proposed location of the facility. The location was chosen according to the privileged closeness to an existing parking lot, and also in order to take advantage of a concrete slab that was left from previous constructions and has no current use.

Columns, walls, beams, and waste deposits will be constructed of concrete blocks, thus making the building permanent within the community while limiting the risks of anyone taking something from the structure. The roof will be made out of clay tiles to continue the design concept of the surrounding gazebos.

*Fig. 6.2 to 6.6: Images of proposed intervention for the informal settlement of Boca La Caja.*
Case 2 Intervention: Panama Viejo

Field of History

Similar to Boca La Caja, Panama Viejo is one of the oldest informal settlements within the City and it is already considered by many as established and formal. Consequently, all the houses are provided with the basic infrastructure resources. The main feature that differentiates these two settlements is that Panama Viejo (as its name implies ‘Old Panama’) is the location were the City of Panama was originally founded four and a half centuries ago. The area is filled with ruins from that period and is heavily visited and studied by travelers and archeologists from all over the world. One can say the ruins are clustered between two informal settlements: Panama Viejo and Puente del Rey (the latter is not being studied in this thesis). This is one of the most traveled routes of northeast Panama City. It is through this area that people from the west peri-urban centers make their trek each day to the City’s business and commercial center. The government has made many attempts to conserve the area by protecting the ruins and has even considered closing the vital road, but these plans have never been put into action. It is generally understood that the residents of the two informal settlements have little or no understanding of the importance of the area, at least on the terms of the visiting archeologists.

Fig. 6.7: Location of the study site in Panama Viejo settlement.
Design Interventions

Case 2 Intervention: Panama Viejo

It is the case that most of the open areas among the ruins are used by children of the communities to play soccer, without any regards to what might happen when balls and other objects bounce off the ancient rock walls. Since the authorities still have many issues to resolve before they can actually come to a solution to preserve the area, and the settlers will probably never move (this is the reason why children will keep playing no matter how many times they are told not to); I propose a small intervention that protects, temporarily, the ruins, while 'illegally' allowing kids to still use the grounds for their recreation. The proposed structure is a large screen made out of leftover metal bars found in the surrounding elite constructions, to be located at least eight feet from each ruin found near an improvised playing field. The idea is to involve the community in the construction, while educating them about the conservation of the area. The metal structure will be connected to the ground with concrete and the screens, made out of metal meshes, can be designed by the community, allowing several art forms to be applied.

Site Plan, showing a potential area for the location of the protective screens in relation to the field and the community. As shown below, images that can be used to decorate the screens. This one in particular, improves the site by using images of the best preserved ruins of Panama Viejo.

Fig. 6.8 to 6.11: Images of proposed intervention for the informal settlement of Panama Viejo.
Case 3 Intervention: Nueva de Enero

Connecting Communities

Nueva de Enero is one of the informal settlements created in the 1980s by people that were moving from the rural lands of the West to work in the City, but were unable to find a decent place to live, so they invaded. The informal and the formal communities were both built around the same period and grew at a constant, even pace. No real concern for the connection entry was shown from the formal community until the end of the 80s and beginning of the 90s, when the country was under a dictatorship and life in Panama became scary and uncertain. During this crucial time, people from Linda Vista wanted to close the connection entry because robberies were getting more frequent and violent, and the path was used as an entry-safe-zone and hide out for those who stole from the formal community. The connection between Nueva de Enero and the formal Linda Vista (‘Pretty View’, name of the formal neighborhood) had always existed. It began as a small nine-foot wide mud path that led to the houses on the hill. The path was never closed, and so, today the path still exists but with minimal changes. Now, one does not walk on dirt, but concrete. No one from Linda Vista really wants to improve the path because that would be like telling the

Location of Entrance
My House

Fig. 6.12: Location of the study site in Nueva de Enero settlement.
Design Interventions

Case 3 Intervention: Nueve de Enero

Residents from Nueve de Enero that it is alright to come through the neighborhood each day, look around and even steal. At least, that is the general mentality. Those who reside beside and in front of the connection node think some improvements can be made, specially when it come to the garbage. Many residents from Nueve de Enero bring their trash bags to the connection entry because the trucks only manage to access the street besides the entry and are unable to make it to the houses on the hills. This makes every corner of the entry even less attractive and more despised by the residents of Linda Vista. (See page 78, photographs 5.21 and 5.23).

The proposed intervention aims to create an entry that serves as a place for the residents of Nueve de Enero to leave their trash bags in a more organized manner, while making some improvements to the path way. Since both sides of the path are fenced private areas of Linda Vista, the interventions will only be made to the existing public path to avoid any confrontation between the residents. Besides the sheltered entry, the intention is to design an art walkway and plant some tall, rather not very leafy trees on the sides. This way, avoiding the creation of hide outs for thieves at any given time.

Site Plan, showing the nine-foot wide path in relation to the street and the existing private areas of Linda Vista neighborhood.

Images of the proposed intervention to the entry while showing Nueve de Enero neighborhood in the background.

Fig. 6.13 to 6.17: Images of proposed intervention for the informal settlement of Nueve de Enero.
Case 4 Intervention: Valle de Urraca

From Meanwhile to Permanent

When doing interventions for informal communities, many professionals orient their concepts and designs to improving life in the informal settlements as a whole by focusing on the needs of the entire community, rather than making changes for each settler individually. Nevertheless, for this particular intervention I will focus on the needs of one settler: Mrs. Emilia. Having previously been to her home and seen the urgent need she has to finish her roofless permanent home, I decided to talk to her and ask what her immediate intentions with the home were, in order to propose some design solutions.

One major concern I had was the current orientation of the home, since it should have been constructed east-west. Instead, both the roof and the smallest sections of the house, are in a north-south position. I asked Mrs. Emilia if there was anything in particular she would like built besides the roof. She mentioned a front open, yet covered terrace, and a new toilet room, but located outside the house. Both things seemed very familiar, in the sense that it somehow revealed her rural past. Some of the constructions I saw on the journey to Sona (her place of birth) had these two

Location of Mrs. Emilia’s home in Valle de Urraca

Fig. 6.18: Location of the study site in Valle de Urraca settlement.
Design Interventions

Case 4 Intervention: Valle de Urraca

building characteristics, and so, it made sense. The idea of having a front covered terrace could somehow alleviate the sun exposure of the house core during the day. And in regards to the new toilet room, this one could be built on the back of the lot, separated from the house, but connected through a path that also leads to the front terrace. Her only concern was decreasing the amount of land on which to grow crops. Reason why, all the new additions would be placed close to the east of the lot, near the property line. The current area of the permanent house is 37.50 sqm (398 sqft). With the two new additions Mrs. Emilia’s house will have 52 sqm (560 sqft). Which leaves a total of 15 sqm (161 sqft) of construction, in addition to the roof. According to Mrs. Emilia, so far she has spent a total of $1,800 (including materials and construction) for the permanent house. Her neighbor and builder originally charged her $15 per day of construction for the partially constructed house. He ended up charging $150 in total. She stated that she will probably ask him to finish the house once she has gathered the money.

Approximate total cost of Mrs. Emilia’s home:

<table>
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<th>Cost Item</th>
<th>Amount</th>
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<tr>
<td>Cost of original construction</td>
<td>$4,800</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cost of proposed addition</td>
<td>$720</td>
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<tr>
<td>Roof (original and added)</td>
<td>$1,120</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Total (52 sqm - 560 sqft)</strong></td>
<td><strong>$3,640</strong></td>
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Site Plan:

1. Established property line of Mrs. Emilia’s lot.
2. Proposed front-covered terrace.
3. Meanwhile house and bathroom. To be demolished.
5. New location of her bathroom.

Fig. 6.19 to 6.23: Images of proposed intervention for the informal settlement of Valle de Urraca. Intervention to Mrs. Emilia’s permanent home.
**Case 5 Intervention: Los Laureles**

**Permanent Invasores**

Los Laureles is the only informal settlement studied that has yet to be invaded. That is why, for this last intervention I propose the application of the so-called ‘vivienda semilla’ - ‘seed home’, which is the first recommended step in the constructive process of appropriate technology for massive social housing in Latin America. Accompanied by financial savings and loans, the seed home is a progressive housing system that will be organized and sustained by the family itself. The house is pre-assembled on a platform of reinforced concrete structure that attaches it to the ground and covers the basic needs of shelter. In the case of Los Laureles settlement, I propose that a concrete platform, the basic structure and roof be assembled, but not the enclosures. Houses can vary from 32 sqm (344.45 sqft) to 45 sqm (484.38 sqft) and they can be build with different materials, but it is the size, and most importantly the orientation in relation to the lot, that are crucial for the future construction and development stages of the home, as well as, the area or neighborhood. Reason why, part of the intervention includes proposing the re-orientation and design of the lots. Previous settlements located right beside Los Laureles have not taken into consideration the location and orientation of the lots in relation to the sun. To avoid maximum sun exposure on the longest portion of the home, I propose that the new lots be rotated 90 degrees south.

Location of Los Laureles

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Fig. 6.24 to 6.26: Location of the study site and image of a seed home in Los Laureles settlement.
“Field work is presumed to require trust. But one never can know for certain that he or she has gained such trust, given the absence of any agreed-upon indicator of what ‘full’ trust would look like.” 52

While sitting at my studio desk at Ball State University I proposed a logical, yet rarely answered question: What do immigrants from the rural bring with them when they move to the city? I was specifically targeting those squatter, informal, invasores immigrants who seem to have no choice but to illegally take the land. I thought about the complexities of the questions: Who was I asking this to? Could I find the answer in Panama? And, who would be my source? Who could I trust? During the first research month, my mind was clear on what I wanted and what I had to achieve. Find a reliable, trusted ‘someone’ who had recently moved to Panama City and was from the rural lands. I failed to find a recent immigrant, so I leaned towards the person I trusted most at the moment, Mrs. Emilia. I did not have a specific program for her but I asked her to help me, to take me to her home in the City and her rural past. She agreed, but communication and missed translations (even though we speak the same language) about what I wanted and what she understood I needed, became somewhat of a barrier. Her stories from the migration to the City and the journey within seemed to be very clear in her mind, but her past was blurry and inconsistent. Maybe it was because at the moment, I was unaware that she had migrated when she was only 11 years old. Even though she and I were both unclear about her rural past, I decided to continue with her story and go back to El Guarumal, Sona, which is almost a five-hour drive from the City. Before we left on our trip to the place she was born, I asked her how long it would take to get there and how long it had been since the last time she visited the place. Her answers were

confusing. She talked about leaving the City around 9:30 a.m. and getting to Sona around 1:30 p.m. Then she wondered for a while about the last time she had gone to visit her mother, sister, and older son in El Guarumal. I must say, I never got an answer, she did not remember. Even with all these preludes, I decided to go and get the story for my thesis. I took a map of Panama with me because I had never gone to the region. The farthest I had ever gone was to Santiago, which is the capital of Veraguas province, the province in which she was born.

We made it to Santiago in four hours, stopped for some refreshments, got on and kept driving. At that moment, I asked Mrs. Emilia if she knew what the entrance to Sona was, she answered that we had to keep on going and that she would recognize it once she saw it. We drove for almost an hour and never found the entrance. I tried to show her on the map where we were so she could show me where we had to go. But Mrs. Emilia can not read, so she could not understand the map. We had completely missed the entrance, which was actually back in Santiago, and driven to the next province without a clue. So we went back and entered through a rocky, old, and damaged rural road to try to make up for the lost time. When we actually made it to Sona, we asked Mrs. Emilia again for directions to her mom’s house, she just answered that we had to keep going, that it was still an hour away and that she would recognize the entrance to El Guarumal when she saw it. By that point we were all frustrated, including Mrs. Emilia. She then confessed that it had been more than ten years since the last time she came to El Guarumal, and that she hoped the Christian cross was still at the entrance because that was her orientation sign. Almost six hours later, we found the entrance with the cross, and we drove in, but we never made it to her mom’s home. The road was muddy and the rivers were flooded, so we could not drive through, and the house was still an hour away. We never got to see her place in the rural.

I reflect now upon my methodology, my question, my trusted someone, and my goals. It becomes clear that the question was difficult and limited, and that having to trust someone for answers made everything even more complex. Trusting someone meant forgetting that it was all about the ‘question’ and making yourself vulnerable to this person’s ability and willingness to help and provide. At the end, Mrs. Emilia was unable to provide some answers to my original inquiry, but having been immersed in her life for a month opened a whole new set of questions that led to the making of this thesis.
Reflections

“As cities grow in size and population, harmony among the spatial, social and environmental aspects of a city and between their inhabitants becomes of paramount importance. This harmony hinges on two key pillars: equity and sustainability.” 53

If there is something I have learned from this research, it is that as architects we are so immersed on reflecting once and again on our illusive projects and uninhabited creations, that we miss great learning opportunities from other’s creative capacity. These ‘others,’ the informal builders of the world are, as Robert Neuwirth states, creating the cities of tomorrow, and they are not requiring our services. If architecture is concerned with economics and growth, and economics with society, should not architecture be socially concerned also? Whether they are called slums, squatters, or informal settlements, the phenomenon of illegally invading and building is nothing new, but the logistic and social approach differs from one location to another. As I studied Mrs. Emilia's case and gazed on some common situations in the informal cases of Panama City, it became obvious to rationalize that if we believe the invaders and informal settlers need our help, we are going in the wrong direction. No one discards that on a technological and resourceful level these communities need assistance, but to think for one moment that as architects we might be able to provide more accurate building solutions, without immersion, is unfortunate. While studying informality in Panama I came to the conclusion that settlers like Mrs. Emilia tend to have more liberties and are well aware of their rights as ‘invasores’ and ‘precaristas.’ Maybe this is a reason why she once implied that she would never move from her lot in the City. At the beginning, unstable informality may seem like the only alternative, but after a while it becomes a vantage point, a habit-forming lifestyle, and the only way they know how to live in the City. Mrs. Emilia may be able to buy formally, deal with banks and loans, but why would she when the City, the ministries, and society offer a different alternative? The informal lifestyle has its perks, and like Mrs. Emilia, many informal settlers in Panama City know that once they invade and temporarily build, they are in the system. Therefore, instead of looking at it one-way, in which architects and planners only seem to provide and suggest improvements, maybe we can also be learning from their system. As a result, architects and many other “decision makers” of the formal economy might be able to make more realistic contributions to the current informal city-shapers of our world.

Appendix

Diablos Rojos - Red Devils
Panama's Public Transportation System

Known as diablos rojos, or red devils, the buses that go through the streets of Panama City are a meta-institutional phenomenon instigated by drivers and owners who have gradually taken control of public transport due to a lack of official options. Rarely checked over, dangerous and ramshackle, many of these buses have their own highly individual aesthetic. They are often painted with pictures as disparate as idyllic snowy or autumnal landscapes from somewhere in Europe, Hollywood actors, saints, sportsmen and women, politicians, and emblems with flowers and arabesques. This practice has not just given rise to a new breed of artist responsible for expressing the personality, tastes and beliefs of the vehicle's owner, but an entire alternative mercantile and labour network. Óscar Melgar, whose paintings adorn many buses in the capital, began working at the age of 14 in the workshop of Andrés Salazar, one of the “fathers” of bus painting. Jesús Javier Jaime, another painter much sought after by bus owners, graduated in automotive mechanics and graphic design, among other disciplines, but prefers to devote himself full-time to buses which he began painting in 1989.

In 2006, a faulty connection in the engine of a diablo rojo caused a fire in which some 20 adults and children burned to death. In view of the panic and public consternation, the government has promised to take severe measures in order to regulate transport and look for alternative solutions. In other words, the days of the diablo rojo are numbered, and their disappearance will put an end to a genuine popular display which has marked the cityscape for decades, and withstood all official controls.  

Making Microplans
Community Based Process in Programming and Development
by Reinhard Goethert and Nabeel Hamdi

Micro-planning is a process of programming and evaluation the social needs of distressed communities and it has been evaluated and implemented by several countries of Latin America, including Chile and Peru.

Summary

Micro-planning is a community-based process, which enables local people to prepare and implement programmes for settlement upgrading and regeneration. The aim is that local participants contribute not only to the content but also to the structure of the programme so that plans are not pre-packaged and handed down to local communities by governments and funding agencies. What often stops people from solving their housing and other problems is not so much lack of skills or willingness but an adequate framework for articulating problems, defining solutions, and building consensus and partnerships. After the first chapter which deals with the theory of Micro-planning, chapter two shows the methods illustrated in practice through a community-based workshop in La Pintana, low-income community outside of Santiago, Chile, and in chapter three a workshop in Sri Lanka. Section II of the book includes the handbook itself for readers to carry out their own workshops.  

Micro-planning is focused on addressing three general and well-known questions: What is wrong in the community? What could be done to fix and intervene? How should we intervene? The answers are formed by following the already marked process of the following five stages of action and analysis:

1- Identifying the problem.
It is about knowing how we view and how we can confront the physical and social
configuration of the place. It involves documentation and analysis, and the process to follow is as follows:

1. Elaborate brief field studies in groups within the studied population; one can predetermine each group’s field focus and attitude.
2. Number and define the different problems according to how each field group identifies it, indication ‘why’ and ‘for whom’ the problem exists.
3. Classify the problems with all the participants and define its level of importance.

2- General strategies to solve the problems.
The objective is to identify alternative ways of facing the identified problems and to place them in order of priority.

2.1 Prioritize the strategies that are considered appropriate in each group by specifying its level of urgency.
2.2 Negotiate within the group a list of summarized and agreed actions.
2.3 Every group places the action in a priority order.

3- Agreement on the programs, measures of valuation, options and exchange between priorities.
The goal is to identify various appropriate ways of implementing the previous strategies and to select the most appropriate. Steps to follow:

3.1 Elaborate a list of the ways in which a strategy can be implemented, while attaching the ‘formal’ costs of the intervention.
3.2 Decide what options are technically more feasible, desirable, and cost efficient. This can be rethought throughout the whole process by negotiating the community input.

4- Planning the implementation.
It is about establishing a process with defined steps for the implementation of the agreed program.

4.1 Organize in time and distribute the tasks to each part involved in the program.
4.2 Plan the improvements on site, including the new additions and check upon of the results.
4.3 Plan the improvements to the houses including the new additions and the check upon of the results.

4.4 Elaborate a detailed integrated schedule of the how, where, and when to proceed, while incorporating the proposals made in each field (social, sanitary, economic, etc.).

5. Monitoring and assessment.

The objective of this stage is to learn of the personal efforts and incorporate the experience in the following improvements through the verification of how the program has function and been implemented. It is to be elaborated at the end of the process but it can also be done at the beginning based on previous experiences and to avoid committing the same errors. The process to follow is:

5.1 Identify the previous plan.

5.2 Revise the situation by teams and write down what is to be learned.
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