

Metropolis Nonformal – Anticipation

A global gathering where voices for the poor echoed through a royal ballroom

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Medellin, Colombia

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One of the most striking differences between the symposium “Metropolis Nonformal – Anticipation” and other meetings hosted by the TUM Institute for Advanced Study was in the language participants used to present their work and argue with each other. It tended to be poetic, political, and rich in invented terms – often contested – designed to capture the essence of complex social and economic phenomena, to convey the nuances of problems and ways they might be approached, and to draw distinctions between seemingly similar points of view. “This is so new,” said Hans Fischer Senior Fellow Christian Werthmann, “that we’re still struggling to find the right terminology.”

At the same time, this symposium exemplified a core characteristic of the Institute: the ability to couple a starkly realistic view of 21st-century society’s great challenges with irrepressible optimism, engagement, and creativity.

In this case, the focus was on how urban planning, design, and architecture might ease the distress of people leading a marginal existence in and around the world’s megacities. Wherever a city’s planned infrastructure and officially sanctioned housing stock are inadequate for waves of new residents, or simply out of reach for the poor, people do what they can to create their own. The results – ranging from huts on hillsides to improvised low-rise row homes and gangster-dominated camps under bridges in flood zones – are the slums of our time. “People are forced into living conditions that increase their health, environmental, economic, and social vulnerability, and there’s nothing nice about that,” said Claudio Acioly of UN Habitat, the United Nations agency for human settlements.

Over a period of decades, authorities and to some extent academics have responded to these self-made slums – “informal” or “nonformal,” “self-constructed” or “self-produced” – in a series of stages: denial, eradication, tolerance, and improvement. The next stage, according to Werthmann, must be anticipation. The global population of such communities is expected to swell by an additional two billion children, women, and men between now and 2050.



Claudio Acioly and Christian Werthmann

The starting assumption for the Metropolis Non-formal Focus Group of the TUM-IAS is that most of these migrants will have a hand in building and shaping their own urban environments.

The total number of academics and professionals devoted to accommodating this looming human tsunami is relatively small, of course. Thus the 50 speakers and 250 other participants in the November 20–23 “Anticipation” symposium constituted a significant fraction of that community. Their meeting also served as the official launch of the new UN Habitat University Initiative Hub on Informal Urbanism. This “UNI” Hub, Acioly explained, is expected to develop new kinds of research and knowledge that can support needed changes in policy and practice globally. He said the Hub would provide more relevant training for future leaders, build trust among stakeholders, and facilitate match-making across a global network.

Nearly every continent was represented at the Munich meeting. The opening lecture by Mumbai-based Rahul Mehrotra focused on stories from his experience in India while, conceptually, ranging far and wide. Speakers shared their research and experience in critical areas of the Asia-Pacific region, Central and South America, and Africa. From every region, descriptions of the demographic trends, living conditions, and political obstacles often made the situation sound hopeless. Yet somehow hope nearly always was part of the message,



Ninik Suhartini

together with confidence and commitment – for example in the assertion by Harvard's Anna Heringer that “architecture is a tool to improve lives.” She talked about “handmade architecture” as a catalyst for developing shelter, communities, skills, and work opportunities. “And it's also,” Heringer added, “strongly linked with the longing for beauty and dignity.”

A common theme was the claim that meaningful advances could in fact be achieved by simultaneously harnessing “global creativity” and local knowledge. Cynthia Smith of Cooper-Hewitt argued

that solutions could be transferable: “Innovative strategies developed for locations with limited resources and challenging environments can be adapted for use in cities around the globe, including in the US and Europe, where resource consumption needs to be reduced.”

The optimistic strain was tempered, however, by skeptical comments and accounts of well-intended interventions that failed. Edgar Pieterse, from the University of Cape Town, took a deliberately provocative stance: “We should get more real here. I think that there's been a kind of naivete about politics and about power and about popular culture, and in some ways a kind of silence about these things, which are absolutely fundamental to structuring the condition of informality.”

While explaining how his group, based at the National University of Singapore, accomplishes precision mapping and modeling of river settlements over time, Jörg Rekittke asserted that it was “not helpful” to differentiate between formal and nonformal. “That's why I call it ‘permanent residence on board a sinking ship,’” Rekittke said, adding that in the Jakarta settlements he is engaged with, “the people on board are celebrating life.”

More than one speaker commented on the incongruity between the event's topic and its location in the Sophiensaal, a royal ballroom designed and named for a 19th-century princess. If anything, though, that may have sharpened attention to present-day conditions underlying urban poverty, such as the grotesque inequality between the world's richest families and nearly everyone else.

Words of the writer Samuel Beckett, equally brilliant and bleak, were invoked to express the paradox of persistently striving toward a probably impossible goal: “Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.”

Patrick S. Regan



Rahul Mehrotra and Hubert Klumpner



Edgar Pieterse



Martim O. Smolka and Maria Teresa Diniz

