The Formal, the Semi Formal and the Informal: The Case of Dortmund[1]

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In the spring of 2016, I was asked to participate on a research programme concerning the implementing procedures of a public 'Living Room' for the City of Dortmund in Germany. The project lies on the rehabilitation of vacant buildings within the Nordstadt area, a district with long history of serious space issues and integration matters. As the project itself is inspired by informal procedures of planning, it becomes essential to approach urban planning as a both Top Down and Bottom Up process and to try to comprehend and evaluate the ways formal, semi-formal and informal actors are bounded together through the processes of planning and implementing.
Key words: Informal, formal, urban planning, participation, citizens.

Introduction

A joint seminar on informal Urbanism, between architects and urban planners, initiated by the Goethe Institute and funded by the Robert Bosch Foundation, involved two consecutive workshops concerning the city of Dortmund in Germany and the city Athens in Greece.[2] The workshops took place respectively in September and in November of 2015. During these workshops, students from two universities, TU Dortmund and NTU Athens, were asked to reflect on the implications of the informal urban development on both cities and to propose projects inspired by informal procedures of planning. During the discussions that took place, both parties reached this conclusion: Northern and Southern European countries share a different notion of what 'Informal' means when referring to urban space development. Furthermore, several topics and questions were brought to light. Which of the ideas deriving from a project of Informal Urbanism can actually be integrated into the city's plans and what are the difficulties regarding the existing legislative system? Moreover, is it possible to physically plan informality?

The student projects focused mainly on alternative types of living space, emphasizing the need to share, connect and interact through public space. The results of the workshop were

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[1] An earlier version of this article under the title 'The Informal Aspects of the Formal Urban Planning System' was presented during the International Conference 'The Informal and the Formal in Times of Crisis: Ethnographic Insights' that took place in Corinth, Greece, in 2017. The Conference was held by the Department of Social and Educational Policy of the University of the Peloponnese under the aegis of the IUAES Commission on Urban Anthropology, the International Urban Symposium-IUS and the University of the Peloponnese. A later version, under the present title, was discussed at the Seminar on Cities in Flux held in 2018 at Anglia Ruskin University in Cambridge. The present version has been revised and updated by the author, based on the research related to her on-going theoretical thesis.
[2] Both workshops were conducted under the supervision of Constantinos Moraitis and Penny Koutrolikou on behalf of NTUA, of Christa Reicher and Dipl.-Ing. Päivi Kataikko-Grigoleit on behalf of TU Dortmund and of Juliane Stegner and Iris Asimakopoulou on behalf of the Athens Goethe Institute.

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followed by further evaluation and additional research on the implementation of the proposals at subsequent stages.

During a second visit to the city of Dortmund in Germany, in 2016, we were asked to research on the implementing procedures of the Living Room Project — one of the 4 student projects that was originally presented during the workshop in September of 2015. A feasibility study of the workshop's proposal was required. Working under real life conditions, it was necessary to re-evaluate the 'informal' and 'formal' urban development as complementary procedures. At the same time, it was important for this research to re-define informal space and its multiple meanings.

Shifting from the Role of the Single Planner towards a Participatory Process of Design

> 'The recognition of the collective right to take part in public life is not only a vital human need, but a sine qua non step for the integration of national and ethnic minorities in multicultural states.'
>
> (Nimni 2008: 7)

Urbanization has been one of the most striking developments of the 20th century.[3] As contemporary cities transform rapidly into multi-cultural and multi-national spaces of interchange, the urban landscape becomes more and more challenging and controversial. The traditional urban planning system and its inadequate response towards the urban conflict between the homogenous physical space and the heterogeneous non-material space of socio-economic, religious and cultural difference, often leads to unresolved issues of urban growth and development. Large-scale movements of refugees and migrants affect decisively the configuration of the city's landscape, especially during times of political crisis and economic depression. The forced displacement of populations is often associated with phenomena of informal urban development.

Nevertheless spatial 'informality' bears a controversial meaning, depending on the historical and geographical diversity of the places in question. In Southern European countries for example informal processes often provide eligible solutions to unresolved spatial issues that formal planning seems unable to handle. 'Informal' space becomes distinctive of an unsatisfactory legal planning system that fails to arrange suitably the urban environment. But heading towards the North of Europe, informality seems to determine different concepts of

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[3] According to data provided by the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations, the urban population of the world has grown rapidly since 1950, having increased from 751 million to 4.2 billion in 2018. Asia, despite being less urbanized than most other regions today, is home to 54% of the world's urban population, followed by Europe and Africa (13% each). Growth in the urban population is driven by overall population increase and by the upward shift in the percentage living in urban areas. Together, these two factors are projected to add 2.5 billion to the world's urban population by 2050, with almost 90% of this growth happening in Asia and Africa. (https://population.un.org/wup/Publications/Files/WUP2018-KeyFacts.pdf, p.2).

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space development, mostly associated with both visible and invisible spatial barriers, regarding social isolation, lack of communication and language issues. In these particular cases, formal procedures of planning use the term 'informal' in order to emphasise the need for space to become more creative, by bringing together the different community groups, allowing them to interact and connect culturally through a variety of common activities. Accordingly, a regulatory system that needs to become more 'informal' as in more 'flexible' is indicated, emphasizing the need to include more community groups within its planning procedures.

As urban planner Benjamin Davy (Davy 2012) points out, when it comes to projects of urban renewal, the rearrangement of urban space often has a decisive impact on the economic, social and cultural aspects of the city, by bringing forward policies of inclusion and exclusion. Elaborating on the concept of Western ownership and developing his theory based on the poly-rational approach of planning Davy (2014) suggests that Property Law often picks up different rationalities and different voices. The theory of poly-rational property (Davy 2012) introduces a balance between, on the one hand, a simple dichotomy of private and common property and, on the other hand, a multitude of singular arrangements no one can understand or map (Davy 2014).

With regard to Davy's theory, 'informality' is not necessarily the counterpart of 'formality' but more or less *its emphatic variation.*[4] As previously mentioned, informal space meets a variety of concepts as well as a 'multitude of singular spatial arrangements'. In addition, informal urbanism delineates a state of transition from a previous spatial condition towards a future one, as the city tries to re-define itself through constant change.

Shifting from the role of the single planner towards a participatory design procedure, also engages the need for long term vision projects as well as a broad long-term vision of the planning process itself, as the connecting thread towards any future development.

The Bottom-up Approach

Davy states, 'Planners and other policy makers have to understand the multitude of causes of diverse uses and have to know how policy interventions, in the face of plural rationalities, improve the land' (2012: 59). In facing general phenomena such us globalization and multinationalism, one needs to re-examine the overall impact of formal urban design policies on the rapid transformation of the urban landscape. Especially when it comes to urban matters of such complexity, formal structures initiate a bottom up approach within the planning and implementing process, by engaging citizens to participate actively in the decision making.

German Cities have long history of incorporating the bottom-up approach to the formal planning. The cities of Berlin and Hanover in the context of the drafting of 'Strategic Plans 2030' (Stadtentwicklungskonzept 2030) have structured a system of 'Dialogue' between

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[4]As Pardo eloquently suggests when referring to the informal sector of the economy in Naples, 'it would be inexcusably reductive to view local entrepreneurialism in terms of the official dichotomy between the formal and the informal, leading to conceptual oxymoron, like black economy or, even, "dual economy"' (Pardo 2018: 64).

citizens, politicians and administrators, with the aim of formulating goals and strategies for their future development (Serraos et al. 2017: 10).

Several projects such as the communal urban garden Prinzessinnengärten in Kreuzberg and the reusing of the old airport Tempelhofer in Berlin, as well as the projects of Park Fiction and Plan Bude (https://planbude.de/planbude-planning-shack-english-summary/) and the PLATZ project in the city of Hamburg,[5] emphasise the informal, self-managed participatory character of planning and implementation.

These initiatives have emerged directly from citizens' claim for their 'right to the city'. Fully or partially supported by the formal administration, they seem to have developed successfully, offering a wide range of planning and design tools so that all residents and neighbours can get involved in the planning process (Serraos et al. 2017).

The Case of Dortmund

Dortmund, a former industrial German city, is the administrative, commercial and cultural centre of the eastern Ruhr, currently classified as an important node regarding innovation. The city reflects a well-organized and fully operational planning system provided with a coherent network of public spaces and well-designed building blocks. Nevertheless, heading towards the Nordstadt area, we come across a district with a long history of serious spatial issues and integration matters. The cultural heterogeneity in this particular area seems to generate an apparent conflict between the different community groups, enhancing phenomena such as social isolation, criminality and religious discrimination.

Newcomers as well as the existing minority groups often feel unwelcome because of their different cultural background. At the same time the new inhabitants are reluctant to connect with other community groups, avoiding any kind of interaction with the locals.

In   2015,   the   City   of   Dortmund   initiated   the   Projekt   'nordwärts' (https://www.dortmund.de/de/leben_in_dortmund/nordwaerts/start_nordwaerts/index.html), which translates as The 'Northbound' Project. The programme comprises a strategic plan concerning the future development of the City until the year 2025. The plan proposed by the city incorporates an informal approach towards urban space, engaging citizens' participation in various activities. Northbound means 'heading towards the North', so the project itself also involves regenerating the Nordstadt by reconnecting the isolated urban area with the rest of the city.

The Northbound Project was presented to us during the joint seminar in September of 2015. In 2016, I was asked to research on the implementing procedures of the 'Living Room' Project —one of the four student projects that was originally proposed during the joint seminar.

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[5] The four projects situated in Berlin and in Hanover were presented during a Conference on Changing Cities III: Spatial, Design, Landscape & Socio-economic Dimensions that was held in the island of Syros, in Greece during a special session bearing the title 'Bottom up Planning Initiatives in the Urban Space. A Vehicle for a further Democratization of the Urban Planning Procedure?' organized and chaired by: K. Serraos NTUA.

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The Living Room Project is inspired by informal procedures of planning. Its purpose is to provide citizens and newcomers with the necessary resources by helping them adjust and connect. Its concept lies on the rehabilitation of vacant buildings existing in the contested area of Norstadt, by creating an 'indoor public space' of cultural interchange. The Living Room Project, advocates the creative and spontaneous use of space, supported by informal processes of planning through the assistance of formal structures. Working alongside the Municipality and different Organizations the need to approach urban planning as a both Top Down and Bottom Up process, has become essential to this project. Thus, further evaluation was required regarding the ways formal, semi-formal and informal actors are bounded together through the processes of planning and implementing.

Image 1. The Projekt nordwärts: The plan proposed by the city incorporates an informal approach towards urban space, engaging citizens' participation in various activities (photos by the author, May - June2016)

The Formal, the Semi Formal and the Informal
In this section I discuss various steps in the implementation of projects like the 'Living Room' (Moretti 2017). I have used a present tense narrative to describe some of the 'formal' processes involved. Addressing the need to include more citizens within the planning and the decision-making processes, formal actors 'inform' the citizens and let themselves be 'informed' by them. The Municipality runs an open call for citizens by organizing public and cultural events, participatory design workshops and open discussions about the major topics concerning the City and the future projects.

International Week (28.05 – 05.06.2016) is an important public event that brings together the different minority groups residing in the Nordstadt area; it is organised and funded by the

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City of Dortmund. Emphasizing its informal character, through activities that embrace innovative thinking and the creative use of public space, the festival brings together citizens from all over the city, addressing the need to share and connect. The event takes place alongside NGOs, different associations and local initiatives, who put on display their ongoing projects concerning the City, supporting a variety of concepts related with social welfare issues, cultural issues and integration matters, and so on.

Image 2. International Week (28.05 – 05.06.2016) is an important public event that brings together the different minority groups residing in the Nordstadt area (photo by the author, May 2016).

A participatory workshop is held on 3rd July 2016 by the City of Dortmund regarding the upgrading of Bornstraße avenue, one of the city's most important gateways. The City engages experts and young professionals from different scientific fields, asking them to give their insights on important urban matters. Significant information is gathered very quickly, about the particular area of intervention and new ideas and concepts are proposed. Sharing scientific expertise is also very important to the design process. Important feedback is provided on similar interventions in other cities. During these events the presence of stakeholders and active members of the surrounding neighbourhoods is noticeable. Nevertheless, many community groups who are the actual residents of the areas in question, are excluded.

First, the citizens' feedback for the city of Dortmund takes place on 1st June of 2016. The citizens are given the opportunity for the first time to address their concerns and thoughts directly to the City's representatives. The meeting is held in a Mosque and the projects presented concern future interventions within the Nordstadt area. Although all citizens' groups are included, not many citizens are present upon the City's first call. Very few citizens show up, primarily the ones who have been established within the city for several years. Citizens are reluctant themselves to reach out to formal structures. They do not feel confident enough to come in direct contact with the local authorities and address their problems.

Most frequently many of the minority groups are actually represented by NGOs, by Associations, by different types of organizations, and private Companies, who act as

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intermediaries and become the connecting thread between formal structures and citizens. These organisations act as Semi-formal institutions and actively participate in the planning and implementing process of the different projects occurring throughout the city. Their interventions are short term, or even have a long-term impact on the urban environment. In many cases they affect directly the urban fabric and can determine the new urban features of a city area.

Let us look at the case of the Grünbau, a non-profit organisation and a GmbH company. Andreas Köch originally started this initiative in the 1990s. Being unemployed, he created a concept of work alongside a group of friends. They organised a restoration project of the old Gardens in the city of Dortmund (this is from where the name Grünbau derives). The organization's main purpose is to establish programs that employ citizens with poor or no education. The organization runs many different projects — based on different concepts. The necessary funding often comes either from the City (of Dortmund) or from other Social funding Programs and public Institutions such as the ESF (European Social Fund).

'The Social city program' is one of these funding projects. Its concept is similar to the Living Room Project that was proposed during our workshop and involves the rehabilitation of vacant buildings within the Nordstadt area. In 2016 there were approximately 40 vacant buildings in the district. The program is funded by the City of Dortmund and involves different steps and procedures, such as the *Tracing and Contacting of* the actual owners of the houses in question, [6] as well as fixing up the apartments on behalf of the City once the building is acquired. 'The Social city program' is a long-term project due to expropriation procedures. Once the project is accomplished, housing opportunities are provided, aiming different target groups such as students and artists. This affects strongly the character of the city. The decisions taken regarding the readjustment of urban space and bringing new community groups into the area are part of the collaboration between the Grünbau and the City of Dortmund.

Especially when it comes to dealing with integration matters, intermediaries are very active. Many of the projects they propose, are related to social and welfare issues that involve integration policies, concerning dwelling and housing projects, educational, health care and language matters, family issues, and so on.

All these organizations already operating in Dortmund as independent initiatives, provide their assistance to citizens. But in most cases the intermediaries become antagonistic with each other because of the funding they pursue for their activities. Presenting a strong concept to the funding committees, can provide them with better funding conditions. As a result, their initiatives are not coordinated into a city network, easily traceable and accessible to newcomers.

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[6] House owners are not easy to trace, as they may not reside in Germany. They often rent their apartments of poor condition, for criminal activities such as drugs, prostitution and mafia. For example, a single apartment could be rented to 40 people at the same time at a very high price (*the price can actually reach the cost of €200 for renting just a single bed*). In such cases, the City undertakes the task to put pressure on the owners in order to sell, by threatening to expose their illegal activities. At the same time the City tries to deal with high rates of criminality within the Nordstadt area.

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Additionally, citizens' representation seems to be only partially sufficient by these organizations and, as it happens in many cases, the actual residents of the troubled neighbourhoods are not included in many aspects of the planning process itself.
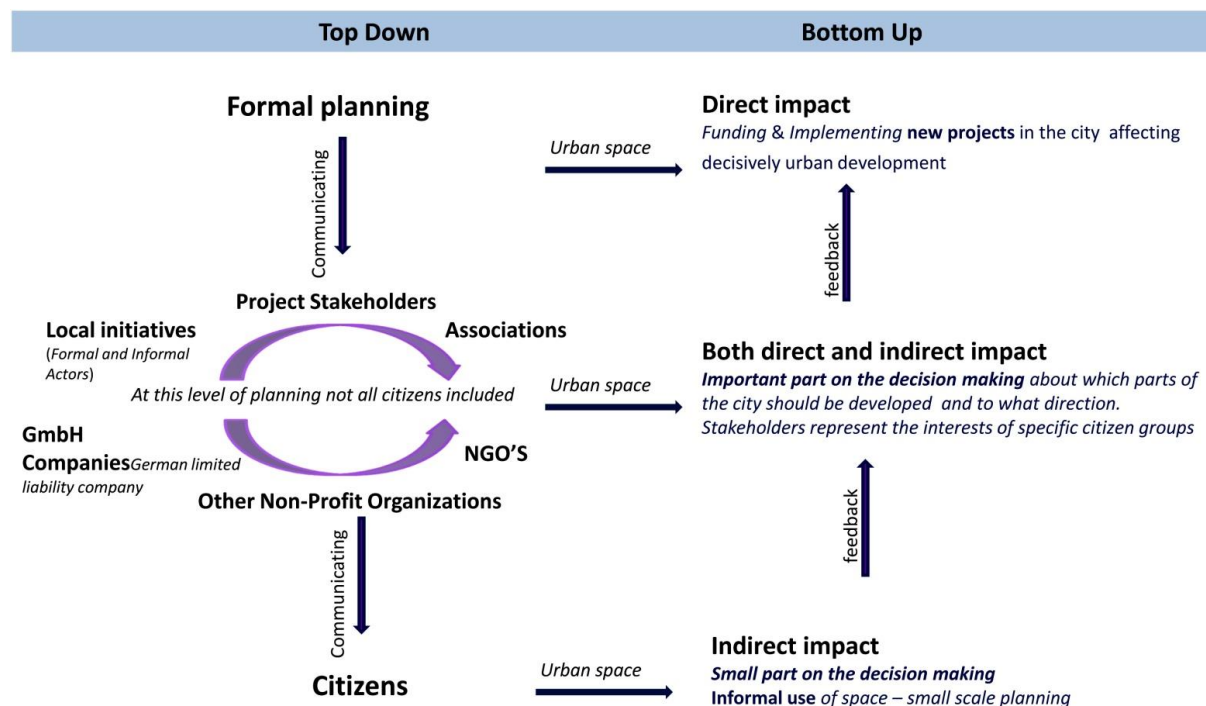
Figure 3 Proposed schema of the Top Down and Bottom Up processes of the urban planning system and the ways they affect the transformation of the urban environment (developed by the author).

Implementing the Living Room Project — Emphasizing the Project's Informal Character
As the Living Room Project is originally set as an example of Informal Urbanism, one would ask, what would the notion of 'planning' the informal imply? Once formal procedures step in, wouldn't that automatically mean that the whole project ceases to be informal and becomes formal?

A similar project such as the Living Room in Dortmund is already operating in the neighbouring city of Bochum. It becomes essential to this research to understand fully the reasons that initiated a project of informal urbanism in the first place. The original concept of the project emerged in 2013 from a group of citizens who failed to organize a second similar public event within the same year. Encountering several obstacles along the way, it seemed to be an extremely complicated procedure to acquire the necessary permits and organize a festival and a flea market inside a courtyard. So, they came up with the idea of a 'public living room', a project that allowed them to organise public events, as frequently as they please, without having to go through formal procedures each time. They became self-organized, formed an NGO for tax free purposes and permanently rented their own place at the end of Alsenstrasse St.

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The Living Room in Bochum is purely intended for public activities and not for any other kind of private use, supporting the idea of an open community project in which all citizens are included. The financing which sustains the project comes directly from the citizens themselves, through an annual flea market and a festival, through membership dues, by producing and commercializing on a regular basis their own products from various activities, such as urban gardening, by commercializing products coming from other community groups who wish to support them. The Bochum Living Room project is 'self-organised' and self-funded providing citizens with the opportunity of remaining independent from any kind of formal planning procedures as well as any kind of state funding. It is also linked with the desire, as genuinely expressed by the citizens themselves, to share, bond and connect. In addition, the 'Self-funding' allows the project to preserve its autonomy, by accepting everyone from all parts of the Community without any kind of discrimination.

Being both inspired and informed by the Bochum Project, the Living Room in Dortmund was likewise initially conceived as an Informal project. The research that was finally submitted to the Municipality stressed the need for the project to develop on its own, as if it were a work in progress. Once the necessary space was provided, the implementing steps of the Living Room project emphasised its 'informal' character, resulting as the need to connect and communicate, expressed genuinely by the citizens themselves and addressed to the entire community. It was also important for the project to become self-organised and self-funded, thus providing its future sustainability.

The research on this project relates the time with each step of the implementing process into short term, midterm and long-term procedures. Each step of the implementing process involves a number of different initiatives (communicating, visualizing and motivating, self-organizing, interacting and implementing) and actions occurring either in successive or simultaneous order. The progress of the project can only prove itself in time. The possible outcomes of the process itself can be unpredictable in many ways. We could only set a possible framework and try to visualise its possible future realities, but it would be rather complicated to try and predict its actual outcome.
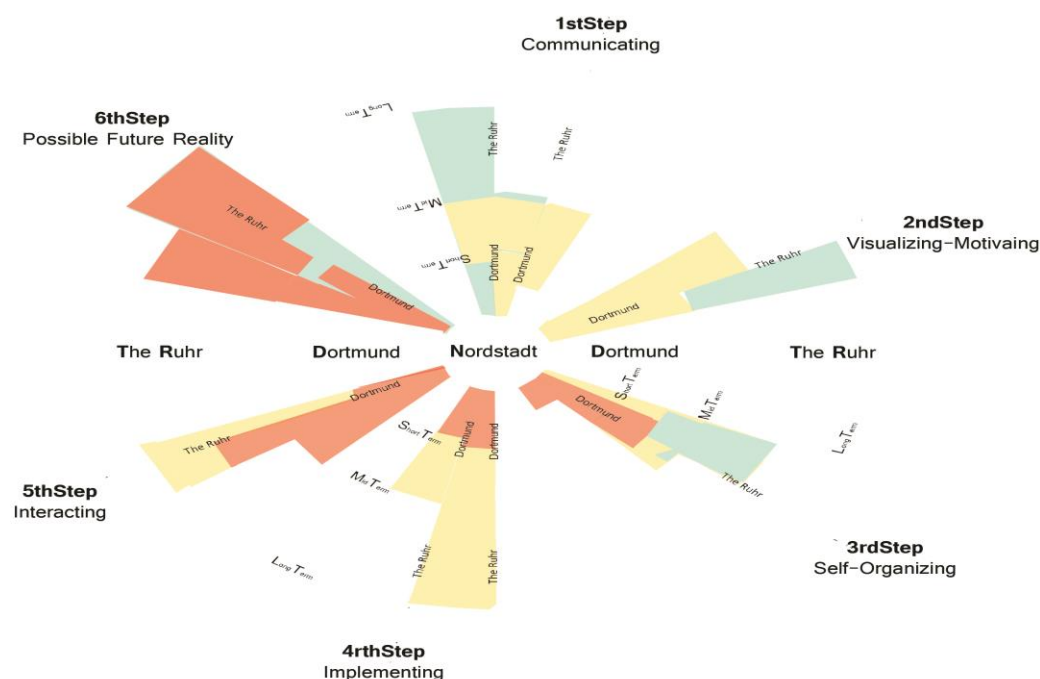
Figure 2 The research relates time with each step of the implementing process into short term, midterm and long-term procedures (Scheme developed by the author).

Conclusions

Interdisciplinary collaboration between formal and informal actors highlights new aspects of what is actually needed for future spatial development.

The Formal planning seeks to find ways to communicate directly with the citizens, engaging them in a mutual dialogue about important spatial issues. It turns out, though, this can be a difficult task as well as a long-term process. Bottom Up and Top Down procedures are equally important in contemporary planning because of the 'feedback' they provide to city planners. It emphasises the importance of a feasibility study that will set the framework upon which the actual planning will begin. But in many cases the incoming information concerning important spatial matters is limited. In the case of Dortmund, the informal approach of the formal planning is less 'informa'' than expected. Participatory meetings and open discussions seem fully structured.

Participatory planning in its most idealised form provides city planners with modified knowledge about new models of living. Grasping images of future possibilities, it enables both citizens and formal structures to 'visualise' what could actually be implemented in terms of use and existing infrastructure and what could possibly be achieved in terms of future urban transformation and adjustment.

Within this context, 'informality' in its pure unmediated condition seems to result as the outcome of an emerging need for change towards urban space, reflecting the degree of 'flexibility' or 'rigidity' towards urban transformation. It is also 'informative' not only to the formal planning but as well on itself, by processing the incoming information, reacting to it and absorbing it, incorporating and finally reflecting it on the future reconfiguration of the urban landscape.

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Additional Material

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