ARTIGO REF: 6447

THE ROLE OF PUBLIC SPACE IN THE REGENERATION OF INFORMAL SETTLEMENTS

João Correia de Freitas[1](*), Miguel Pires Amado[2], Inês Ramalhete[1], António Ribeiro Amado[1]
[1]Fundação NOVAID, Universidade Nova de Lisboa - Lisboa, Portugal
[2]Instituto Superior Técnico, Depart. Engª. Civil, Arquitectura e Georecursos - Lisboa, Portugal
(*)*Email:* jc.freitas@fct.unl.pt

ABSTRACT

The migration from rural areas came about for a number of different reasons but three stand out. Firstly, with the birth of liberation movements and the effective end of colonialism from the end of second world war a lot of nations faced terrible civil strife as the power vacuum generated by the departure of former European nations created the environment for war between the various tribes, religious sects, etc. all searching for resources, power and security of their own (Shipway, 2007).

Civil wars and liberation wars where more violent in the countryside (often the base for the different factions) and, naturally, people began seeking refuge in larger urban areas. Secondly, with the advent of globalization and the transformation of industrial and agricultural practices as well as global resource extraction industries the opportunities in urban areas for the native population became so overwhelming that the chasm between what a family could earn in the countryside with traditional agricultural or forestry versus the lowest paying job in any industry or even informal commercial activity in the city meant that if families wanted a better future for their children they needed to move to the city. As a third reason one could argue that, at least before massive overcrowding occurred, along with the improved access to economic opportunities, living in a big city, even in an informal settlement, provided access to better facilities such as hospital and schools than rural areas (Fischer, 2011)

With this context of continuous migration informal settlements became severely overcrowded and began to go through a process of degradation that in some cities has become completely unsustainable. The lack of sanitary conditions has led to the rapid spread of tropical diseases such as malaria and dengue.

Most governments in face of this desperate situation began implementing policies and actions with differentiated outcomes. One of the most successful examples, and one that most government officials see as a "goal" is the transformation of Singapore (Olds and Yeung, 2004). Although Singapore's context differs widely from many of the realities in the developing world, in particular in sub-Saharan Africa (Cilliers et al., 2013), one of the key issues that the transformation of Singapore highlighted, especially when considering the densification through height policies that were adopted (Jacobs and Cairns, 2011), is the creation of public spaces for the population. One of the critical aspects of this process is how to decide how much public space is actually required and what qualities and features should it have.

As it became apparent that the Singapore model would be very difficult to replicate in other parts of the world, due to differences in culture, government and economics the role of public space needs to be rethought as more and more diverse and incremental approaches such as:

site and service, upgrading, flexible codes and others (Amado et al., 2016) gain foothold. The fundamental question then becomes what type of features, quality, quantity and accessibility will future public space need to have to cater to both ethnically and economically diverse populations in these locations.

In this paper we offer valuable insight into the methods and approaches used today in the definition of the metrics and guidelines for public spaces, in particular in informal settlements. We draw experience from many realities all over the developing world and develop an integrated approach that takes into account the various dimensions of context that exist in each community. Because each community is different (Diouf, 2003) and each government, local or otherwise is faced with different challenges and has different strength. To ensure the success of future public spaces developed approach tries not to be prescriptive in nature but adopt a more flexible nature. However, governments in developing countries sometimes lack the necessary resources, both internal and/or capacity to obtain, to develop more nuanced approaches that result in more contextualized outcomes. With this in mind this paper also focuses on three major elements in public space planning, namely: Quantity, Quality and Accessibility. We propose that certain minimum standards should be observed regardless of context and might be maximized or enhanced if conditions require it. By presenting simple metrics it simplifies the work of local and national authorities by setting clear targets and easy to understand objectives and ways to achieve them. This paper defends that this dualistic approach will serve developing nations of any type of context for a longer period, either in context of lack of technical resources, or in future contexts where technically adept staff is more available and ready to contribute to a better quality of life.

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