IN-TRA-VISIBLE CITIES

Architecture devices for today's Radical Cities

Fierro, Maria[1]

[1] Università degli studi di Napoli Federico II, Naples, Italy
m.92fierro@gmail.com

Il 10 Marzo 2020 l'Italia ha dichiarato il lockdown, un evento che segnerà la vita delle persone e delle città. La pandemia Sars-COVID/19 ha reso evidenti le condizioni mutevoli in cui viviamo e ha riacceso i riflettori, tra le altre cose, sulle disuguaglianze sociali. Lo spazio urbano è il dispositivo attraverso il quale noi possiamo "leggere" le disuguaglianze sociali che diventano spaziali. È la storia dei bordi delle città, lo spazio dell'altro; assistiamo - nelle nostre città - alla configurazione dello spazio urbano che si orienta verso la marginalizzazione spaziale e sociale. La città accumula e, negli spazi residuali, ospita città intravisibili abitate dalle fasce più vulnerabili di popolazione – un paesaggio urbano della segregazione, come nei campi rom o nelle esperienze di risposte informali al bisogno abitativo. I luoghi in cui l'altro diventa vicino e in cui le popolazioni "ospitate" rivelano caratteri inediti dello spazio che viene informalmente risignificato. Partendo da queste premesse, il contributo – che riporta un lavoro di tesi di laurea su un insediamento informale nella periferia di Napoli, e rintraccia l'inizio di un dottorato di ricerca – vuole rivelare alcune parti della città che, da un lato sono gli spazi-scarto e dall'altro accolgono pratiche abitative informali. Il punto di vista proposto, dunque, considera queste parti di città, quelle da cui imparare per una nuova idea di progetto. Attraverso il caso studio, il seguente saggio critico si propone di indagare i pezzi di città invisibili nelle città europee e un approccio innovativo al progetto come dispositivo, rileggendo nell'insediamento informale un riferimento progettuale per proporre nuovi dispositivi spaziali, di interazione tra pezzi di città e tra comunità diverse: le follies contemporanee. Punti, linee e superfici sono considerati come un sistema complesso e adattivo per le condizioni che continuamente mutano e come dispositivi per rendere visibili, spazi e comunità in-tra-visibili. I punti ridefiniscono un layout urbano libero di configurarsi, come nella logica del progetto PREVI, la linea diventa l'elemento catalizzatore che ridisegna la periferia nella periferia, sovvertendo l'immagine del muro come nel progetto Exodus e le superfici che sono lasciate libere di accogliere gli usi spontanei.

On the 10th of March 2020, Italy announced the lockdown, an event that will leave its mark on the cities and, more importantly, the people's lives. The Pandemic, Sars-COVID/19, brought to light the changing conditions in which we live and has also turned the spotlight on social inequalities among other things. Urban spaces are the means by which we can "read" the social inequalities that become spatial. It is the story of the cities' borders, the space of "the other". Urban spaces' configuration are oriented towards spatial and social marginalisation. In the residual spaces, the city accumulates and accommodates "in/tra/visible" cities inhabited by the most vulnerable population - an in-between spatial segregation landscape, as in Gipsy camps, or the homeless. Places where the other becomes close and where the "hosted" population reveals the distinctive character of the place that are informally re-signified. Starting from these premises, this contribution – which is a report of a dissertation on an informal settlement in the suburbs of Naples and traces the beginning of a PhD study - aims to reveal some parts of the city that, on the one hand, are junk spaces and on the other hand welcome informal housing practices. However, this also considers these parts of the city from which we can learn new ideas for architectural project. Through the case study, the critical essay reflects upon the areas of the invisible city in European cities. From this rereading of the informal settlement may come proposals for new spatial devices, the interaction between areas of the city and between different communities: the contemporary follies. Points, lines and surfaces are considered as a complex and adaptive system for constantly changing conditions and devices to make visible, in-tra-visible spaces and communities. The points redefine an urban layout free to configure itself, as in the logic of the PREVI project; the line becomes the catalyst element that redesigns the suburb of the suburb, subverting the image of the wall as in the Exodus project, and the surfaces are left free to accommodate spontaneous uses.

In-tra-visible cities

In-tra-visible cities should be investigated - in the field of sustainable urban regeneration – as a possible architectural project – as a device - to learn from the informal part of the city, to operate on contemporary urban spaces of the European city in which we observe "illegal and informal housing practices [...] of re-codification of human living" (Staid 2017, 156). The theme - which is part of the contemporary debate on the new urban crisis - assumes the point of view of the architectural project that looks at the crisis of urban form, the "slumming of the world", and the increase of social injustices that reveal themselves in the form of spatial injustices. This contribution's title contains an explicit reference to Italo Calvino's "Invisible Cities"; the reworking of the original title is intended to declare a new reading of the text and refers to an in-tra-visibility - contemporary and radical - to be researched. It, therefore, proposes an investigation into the role of architectural design as a catalyst for interaction[1].

"After all, architecture is about shaping the places we live in. It is not more complicated or simpler than that" - Alejandro Aravena.

The in-tra-visible cities are intended as an atlas of unliveable cities, the products of urban crisis. The urban crisis is complex and multidimensional and involves human and urban changes, which are strongly interrelated (Ricoeur 2013, 64-67). According to the UN-HABITAT, the world population will become urban, and in 2030, one-third of the population will live in slums. This scenario also concerns the European Cities, also involving the increase of the gap between "the city of the rich and the city of the poor"[2]. The actual global-city has grown to the point of losing its measure, it engulfs reality and urban facts and pieces of territory, multiplies centres, leaves areas adrift, rages, fragments and recomposes incessantly, in a spasmodic manner; it is increasingly generic, multicultural and multiracial (Koolhaas 2006, 27-41). Moreover, it becomes a world, as described by Marc Augé[3]. Furthermore, it splits from within, germinating (in)visible pieces, leaving or generating junk-space, multiplying margins, waiting for spaces, interstitial spaces with indeterminate character. Finally, its extreme ethnic and social heterogeneity spills over into its spatial aspects, configuring pieces of the city strongly manipulated by users: these pieces are the subject of recent research that traces in them a possible experimental laboratory for an idea of an open city[4].

The residual city - of the rejected people[5], of the suburbs and the timeless ghettos - is the response to the denial of what Lefebvre defined as the right to the city and flanks "the city of desire": it is the informal city, an urban morphology phenomenon of urban cracks. Where numerous urban projects have failed, the anarchic nature of these settlements is outlined as a resource for urban vitality. In fact, J. McGuirk presents the informal cities of the "Global South" as very Radical cities: heterotopias that propose an alternative planning order, signifying the city spaces, the same spaces where actions of sustainable urban regeneration are desired. Their fundamental dimension is the alterity of the dominant order. The question is: if and how can we learn from these urban settlements to build the interaction for the complex urban contemporary condition? From the issue of Lotus International number 143 "Favelas, learning from", began a new phase of studies about the possibility to look at the informal city as an eclectic and composite object from which to learn for a new kinds of urban device. The theoretical framework looks at: the New Babylon (1956) by Constant; attention for human needs studied by Team X; the experimentation of incremental houses with Projecto Previ; the theory of survival architecture by Yona Friedman; the recent positions of U-TT architects; A. Aravena (et al) that looks at the informality as an alternative system of rules, a complex urban identity capable of in-forming contemporary junk-space.

Fig. 1 - Urban framework of informal settlement in Scampia – Naples. Google maps.

The approach proposed here looks at a "different" idea of architecture that is not made explicit with a finite form, but is rather intended as a strategy capable of capturing, in the contemporary situation, the questions and objectives of the research.

The case study - The Cupa Perillo Camp in Scampia (Napoli) - is an experimental study about the architectural project's opportunity, as a spatial device, to learn from a specific informal urban configuration - the Gipsy Camp - to take action on the integration of the contemporary city's interstitial spaces occupied by "marginal" people. This case study is a part of research that aims to understand the fallout of the "learning from informal" on the architectural project's character – beyond bottom-up and top-down logic - and the architect's role. There is a fundamental hypothesis: to consider the "hosted" people as a potential activator of a new logic of places' re-signification.

Today's radical city. One case

"Architecture is not about the conditions of design, but, on the contrary, the design of the conditions that can supplant the more traditional and regressive aspects of our society, while simultaneously reorganizing the elements in a more open way so that, through architecture, our experience becomes that of organized and strategic events. Strategy is one of the central words of architecture today. No more master plans, no more settling into a fixed place, welcome a new heterotopia."
- Bernard Tschumi -

Beginning with this quote by Bernard Tschumi, we present research gathered from the design experiment, inKumpania[6], which concerns a design proposal for the sustainable urban regeneration of an area that, until the summer of 2017, was occupied by a gipsy camp in the Scampia's suburb in Naples (Fig. 1).

Our goal is to highlight a methodology, rather than the results; and this case study is investigated through three moments: the first one is about the construction of a cognitive framework related to a situation involving Gipsies and their condition in Italy and in particular in Naples; the second concerns the physical description of a Gipsy camp, eclectic urban readings that hold together physical, morphological and anthropological aspects; the third is about the construction of a new model of inclusion and urban regeneration in the form of a project. The research traces a typology of in-tra-visibility and investigates its logic to push the possibilities of interaction with the rest of the complex post-metropolitan space. The role of architectural design is crucial, and it is intended as a process that, starting from the construction of a demand, builds scenarios, tools and strategies of intervention capable of adapting to the changes imposed by the challenges of our time. Among the objectives: the unprecedented reading of an area of the city that has underlying rules of the self-production of space, then recovered in the design system; the reflection on the project as a device[7] capable of making the visible invisible.

A work that makes immaterial conditions slip over material ones, and that looks to mankind and not to the typical man, an interest rooted at the borders of the modern movement, in the theories and projects of the members of Team X. The theme of interaction crosses different disciplines, but what interests us is that it is rooted in contemporary conditions. Europe has been examining and admonishing Italy for many years regarding the ineffectiveness of the solutions adopted to integrate some communities, ethnolinguistic minorities, such as the Rom-Sinti-Camminanti (Fig.1) community, who still live in "camps" (Fig.2)[8] .

Fig.2 - Murales by Jorit in Ponticelli, Parco dei murales – Naples, a child who inhabit the neighborhoods of the suburbs.

These structures - the "slums under our house" (Fig. 3) - radicalise the isolation of the social groups but, as Antonio Tosi[9] has written, the camp also represents a structure of social and cultural relations and an idea of community, words that constantly refer to something positive (Bauman). In general, it can be argued that some Gipsy people consider moving to a flat as cultural genocide, but at the same time, many recognise the fact that the camp becomes a problem when the hygienic and sanitary conditions are precarious; very different is the logic of the self-built village as witnessed by Iaio, the head of a family, who, in Staid's book recounts how people build and self-regulate in a kind of horizontal condominium. This village protects a different way of living.

Fig.3 - Italy is defined as the Country of camps, The camps are legal and illegals but the spatial result is the same: informal settlement in precarious conditions.
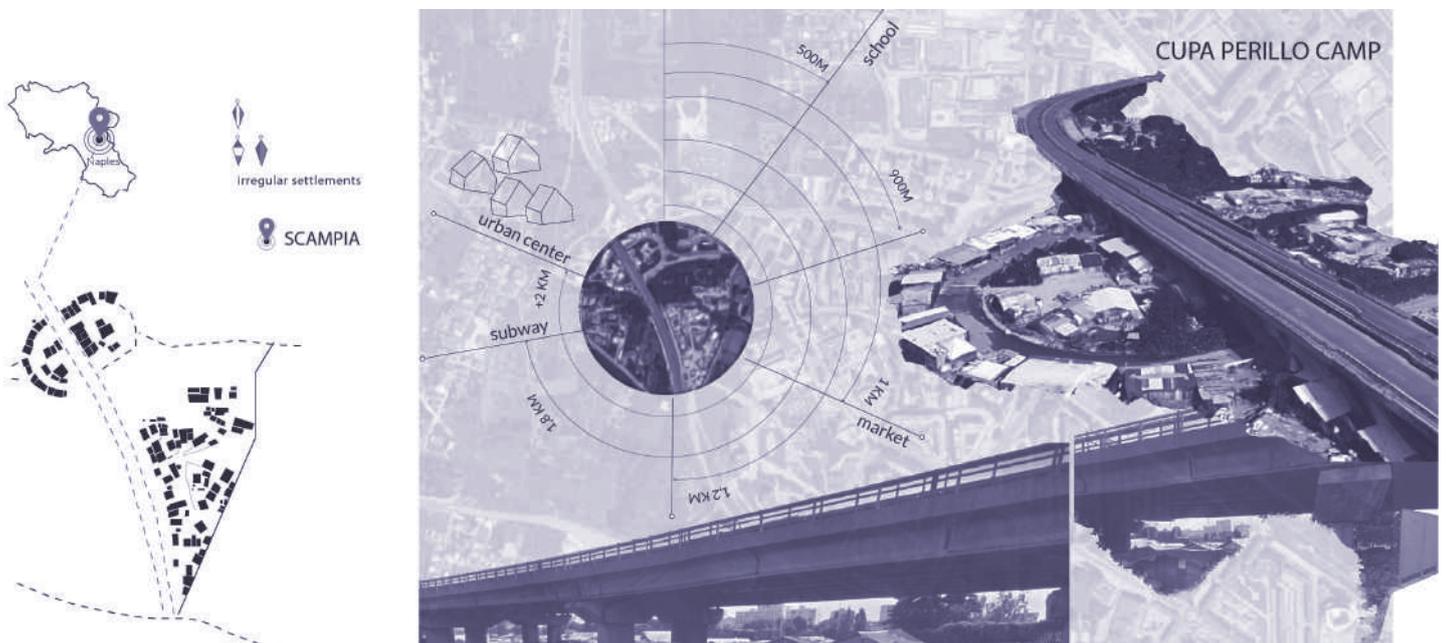

Fig. 4 - Cupa Perillo camp: The relationship with the infrastructure and complex urban space.
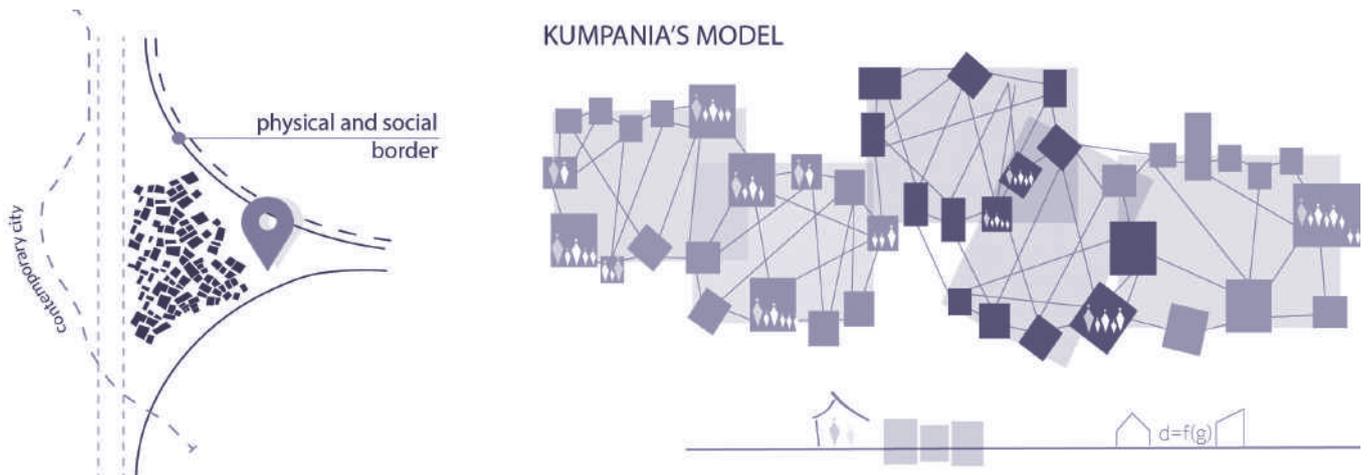
Fig. 5 - Diagram about the inKumpania's model. The distance between the houses is a function of the degree of relationship.
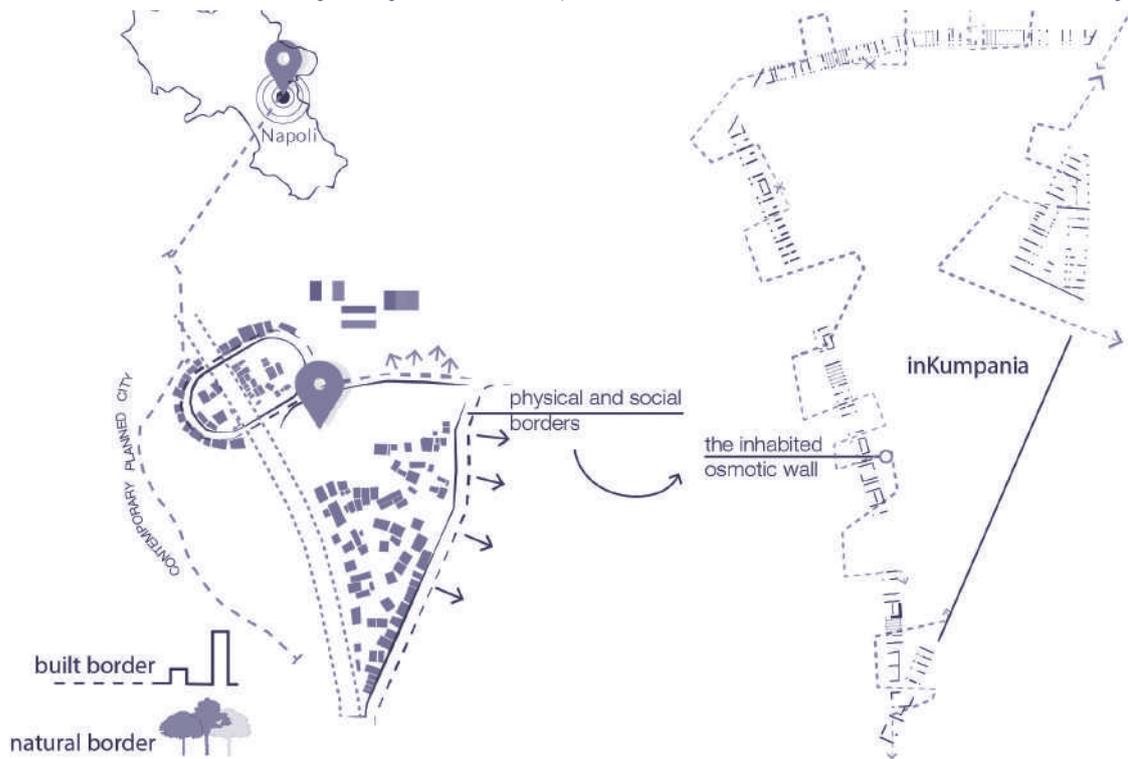

Fig. 6 - The concept of the architecture wall and the relationship between inside and outside the place.

The settlement of Cupa Perillo, isolated from urban streets, was born spontaneously in a close relationship with some infrastructure used as a shelter (Fig.4).

The camp has grown at different times from the elevated highway "Asse Mediano" and represents to all intents and purposes an area of the city characterised by an inner core of houses generally arranged in clusters around a common area and a crown of more "public" functions arranged towards the borders. The camp itself tells the story: it is born and grows in relative freedom, structuring itself on the internal dynamics and relationships between the families and groups that inhabit it. From the form

taken by a camp, it is possible to trace the friendships and the kinships that exist (Fig.5). These relationships are interwoven, but also the mutual distrust between groups that are too different to live in the city and the closure of the camp to the outside, the result of the self-defence of the Rom community, resulting from the events that occurred over the years of policies aimed at social and spatial exclusion.

Starting from an eclectic reading of this area of the city – with the redrawn map, photos, collages and tales - the proposed design methodology is articulated by overlapping interdependent systems recognisable as points, lines and surfaces that already characterised the camp. An

urban system of follies that reinterprets precise moments of the disciplinary tradition of the second half of the 20th century.

Point, lines e surfaces: follies

The point, line, and surfaces are the structural elements of this urban morphology structure.

With the idea of building flexible spaces that could aggregates around different "common" spaces in order to respond to or translate levels and degrees of kinship and dynamics of different groups, it was decided to work on multiple "layers" in order to interweave different layouts and grids that were overlapping and synthesising them to open up different

possible configurations.

The new settlement, therefore, alludes to the informal logic but, at the same time, it does not renounce an order; that is, it tries to ensure the quality of the living space without sacrificing the flexibility and personalisation of spaces and the internal dynamics of the community and is often an indispensable condition for the maintenance of precarious balances

(Fig.6). The design layers are:

  - the points: the dwellings;

  - the line: the border;

  - the surfaces: the public spaces that assumes a fundamental role in the relationships and life of the community.

The area is re-signified by a wall architecture that, if on the one hand

continues to protect the core of residences, on the other hand, tries to become a filter capable of activating a progressive exchange between what was inside and outside.

The need to measure the area, to ensure conditions of habitability, and build new meanings, has led to the definition of grids/guides for fixed points (Fig. 7).
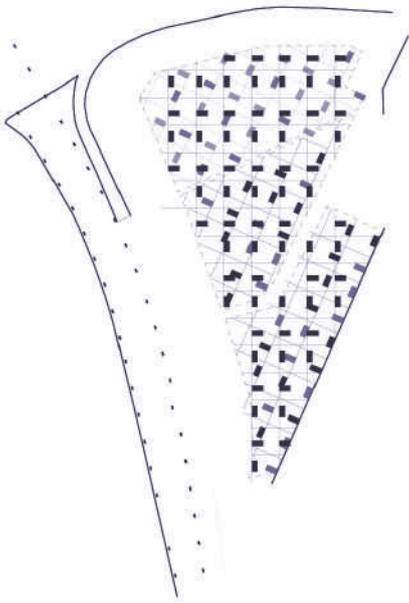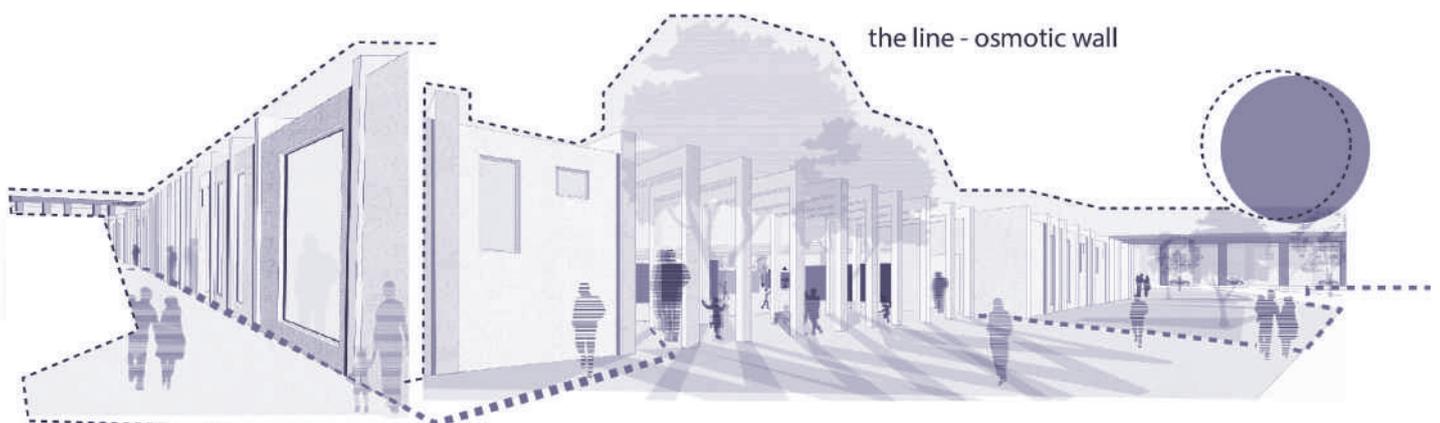
Fig. 7 - From the concept and the grid to the one possible masterplan configuration that explain the point, line and surfaces system.

the line - osmotic wall

Fig. 8 - The illustration of the new osmotic border as a multilayer catalyst.

- The points are the infrastructural elements of the dwellings, which can be configured in various ways and times, reinterpreting the characters of the mutability of self-built dwellings. This logic reinterprets the experiments of the PREVI project in Lima in the 1970s, which reads the architectural device of the house as an open process that accommodates changes and unforeseen manipulations.

- The surfaces and the spaces in between, are deliberately left free from design decisions, a non-finite device that panders to the citè, the space of encounter and unplanned activities.

- The line, the osmotic edge, is the engine of the whole strategic operation, probably the absolute folly, the real catalyst of reconnections and urban unveiling. In this architecture are located some public places and services that "reactivate" and increase existing functions inside the destroyed camp, opening them to the outside. The reinterpretation of the wall and the subversion of the concept of enclosure refers, in addition, to the uses of the fence that Yona Friedman describes in the "architecture of survival"[10] .

Concerning these three layers, the design of the edge is based on the idea of a device for social and cultural interaction. A limit that becomes an edge and the edge that becomes a membrane, an opportunity to trigger processes of enhancement of urban areas, an opportunity to build spaces for sharing and interrelation, a catalyst for economies and micro-economies. It brings with it appropriate dimensions, measures and scales that mediate between worlds that meet and sometimes clash. In this way, the margin acquires a dimension that is no longer linear or even simply punctual; the margins open up, leading to interaction. From potentially segregated to an aggregative concept. (Fig. 8). Therefore, it will not be possible to establish the form of this piece of the city, both for the incremental logic and for the degree of programmatic indeterminacy that opens up new scenarios and design possibilities, certainly prone to socio-cultural exchanges, through architecture and in a new way.

CONCLUSION

Informal, junk space and devices meet in indeterminacy…the theoretical framework looks at the architecture as a system in constant redefinition.

The case study presented here is the starting point of a PhD study. First, the research aims to verify how the architectural project – as a device – can learn from informal settlement to build a more adaptive architectural device of interaction between the poor and the rich.

Second, the study investigates the possible reduction of the gap between project and reality. Finally, it looks at the objectives of sustainable development, particularly the role that the project assumes for reducing inequalities and the development of sustainable and inclusive cities.

At this moment, it leaves more open questions than answers.

Is it possible to make the invisible visible through architectural devices?

What are the conditions to design a world where change is permanent?

Returning to Tschumi - Architecture and its spaces do not change society thanks to architecture and the awareness of its effects, but we can accelerate processes of change that are taking place.

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