

Interview for the Informal Urbanism Book
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QUESTIONS

1. What motivated you to become involved in nonformal contexts?

I believe that the roots of my professional involvement with favelas, slums and poor people's housing problems lies at the early period of my life in Rio de Janeiro. As a young boy attending public school I was confronted head-on with the adversities and critical living conditions that many of my school mates were facing at home. In the beginning of the 1980's, as president of the Student Union of the Institute of Architecture and Urbanism of the University of Brasilia, I led a group that brought the social urban movements and the community leaders of the favelas and satellite cities to hold public debates in our school about the problems they faced in the city. They expressed the highest form of social and spatial segregation in the modernistic model city and showed us the vitality of the informal city that did not exist in our education and official text books. They also brought their struggle for dignity and better living conditions to our struggle for democracy, freedom and human rights against the dictatorship. I later became technical advisor of residents' association of one of Brasilia's largest informal settlements and did my graduation thesis as a slum upgrading project on this settlement called Vila Paraoná which enabled me to develop an in-depth understanding of the rationale of informal settlements and their residents. This led to a job in the city government of Brasilia thereafter as staff member of an executive group commissioned to design, manage and implement citywide slum upgrading and resettlement programme which was the first of its kind in the history of the city. This work enabled me to develop even more the social, economic, policy, political and institutional dimensions of the informal city which led me to projects and programmes in this field in many parts of the world.

2. What inspires you to continue working in this realm?

I have received feedback from people who directly or indirectly have benefited and saw their lives improved as a result of my work which I carried out with colleagues with whom I shared similar principles and values. It is about people's life of today and the opportunities for future generations that inspire me to continue working in different dimensions of the informal city. Human beings, regardless of their place of residence, nationality, faith, colour or ethnicity, deserve to live a life in dignity, peace and safety in cities, and what drives me till today is the belief that I can make a small difference with my ideas, experience, skills and know-how.

3. If you could give advice to people considering getting involved in emerging urban conditions, what would it be?

Go beyond the surface and do not fall into the trap of grand designs that become the end and not the means to enable the future development and full integration of these settlements into the formal city. Go beyond the design and the plan to first understand the deep rooted causes of why the settlement(s) exist, the reasons people settled and built in the way they did, what legal status and regulations govern land and its use and apply methods to unveil the motivations of the various stakeholders that have some kind of interface with the problems and solutions for the area(s). Involve people and their

institutions in your search for understanding and for drawing solutions and alternatives. This will help to frame the technical response of architects, urban planners, lawyers and engineers and transform them into agents of change and urban transformation.

4. Looking at future challenges, what kind of projects would you like to be involved in?

My interest remain with the challenges of designing, planning and managing citywide slum upgrading programmes and put in place policies and strategies that can be sustained for a number of years. Addressing the needs of existing slums that are likely to remain where they stand for many years to come while developing solutions and approaches that to prevent the formation of new slums are two elements of the type of policies and programmes that I would like to promote and be involved.