



A VERNACULAR OF UNCERTAINTY

A distinctly disordered and opened architecture, adapting continuously according to unpredictable events and the uncertain social and economic circumstances of its builder.

CHAPTER 6

VERNACULAR OF UNCERTAINTY

The distinctly disordered house-form found in informal settlements brings to mind a unique variation of traditional architectural vernacular. This is a physical form shaped by impoverished needs, and the instinctive practices of untutored builders with limited access to regulated resources.

The disordered characteristics of this vernacular reflect an architecture pieced together as part of a culture of uncertainty. The resulting physical form reflects an informal world view, where a balance of hope and despair carry none of the privileges or constraints of a formally regulated economy. What we see as a result is an architecture in motion, adapting strategically, as part of an intuitive logic that continually tests the security of its tenure in an uncertain world.

The lesson in this research points to the luxury of styles and designs that serve no practical purpose. In a formal economy, a house is little more than a painted product, bought and sold on the open market. Design and planning are dogmatic tools used in a predictable world where resources can be bought and sold to fulfill any preconceived plan. The resulting buildings hold few universal truths beyond its carefully mediated significance as real property, often enriching already privileged lives with little more than decorations and consumptive details that serve no other purpose.

Traditional Vernaculars

A Vernacular of Uncertainty

Culture of Uncertainty

Communities of Uncertainty

Collective Chaos

Life is Not Straight and Level

Beyond Style and Design

Enduring Uncertainty

Outsider Architecture

THE POINT

The impoverished aesthetic of this vernacular is the antithesis of the fads and fashions found in a consumptive economy. Outside formal market systems, informal house-form is shaped strategically, redefining the margins of order and style, leaving us with the essence of an intuitive shelter and a human instinct for survival.

TRADITIONAL VERNACULARS

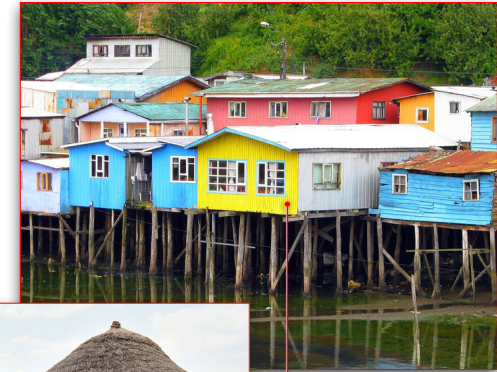
Architectural vernaculars are native or indigenous to a particular region or social setting.* They're shaped by the tools, training, and experience of builders who apply local materials according to traditional practices. The result is a distinct set of common features, material evidence of shared cultural values. This is an architecture put together following generations of long established methods and materials. The success of the vernacular lays in its ability to meet functional requirements with no more than what is absolutely necessary to satisfy the needs and expectations of a community of users. Though cultural decorations may be applied, there are no trendy design elements, stylistically influenced by current fashions, new tools, or fading technologies.

Vernaculars are instead, unconscious

**Vernacular: from the Latin word "vernaculus," something that is commonly possessed by slaves as a necessary object. In architecture, the way an ordinary house is built; the physical characteristics of an ordinary house rather than grand architectural style.*

assemblies, built in ways that are customary to a distinct group of people. Accordingly, they reflect the traditions shared by a community, with features seen as a material culture, social and technical patterns captured as a physical form. In this way, vernaculars are a tangible representation of a common cultural circumstance, binding a community together with physical references that implicitly symbolize underlying social values.

The construction of a vernacular is then the product of an unselfconscious process that is not regulated by written codes or legally enforced standards. In fact, the very character of a vernacular comes from its informality and the absence of a schooled or institutionalized approach to its design or construction. Instead, expectations determine quality and value, appreciated for the familiarity visible in the finished product, while ignoring styles and fashions that find themselves dated and worn as passing fads.



Wikimedia-720px-Pañigón de Castro-ChristinaCorbaya



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The physical characteristics of an architectural vernacular reflect the materials, tools, and methods of people who share the same cultural references



With the same tools, materials, and methods, the characteristics of Neolithic houses must have had their own distinct cultural vernacular

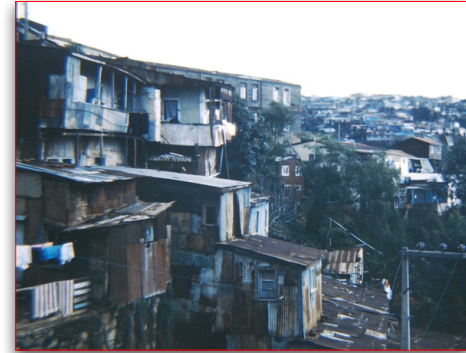
Karen Nicholas - Weiser, Archaeology

Architectural vernaculars are embodied by local materials, common tools, and traditional practices with no pretense of style or design.

A VERNACULAR OF UNCERTAINTY

In the same way the buildings of a traditional vernacular reflect their own common cultural characteristics, the distinctly disordered features visible in an informal settlement are unmistakable evidence of an entirely different set of shared social and economic values. Shaped by an intuitive approach to their assembly, unpredictable materials, and the absence of a plan, what we see is an architecture where uncertainty takes a particularly fluid form, pieced together over years if not decades of continuous change.

Important is that the characteristics of this vernacular are a reflection of its tentative beginnings and the indeterminate nature of an unregulated informal world. Occupying its place on invaded land in a marginalized economy, once crude shelters evolve into house-forms that emerge from a combination of locally sourced native materials and the byproducts of a larger formal economy. The result is an architecture undergoing constant and unpredictable change in an indeterminate process where repairs and improvements resolve disordered and unknown priorities through future generations of related landholders.



Research Archives, 2014, Architects



Research Archives, 2014, Architects

The architecture in informal settlements share the same combinations of salvaged materials and chaotic features, pieced together intuitively with a clutter of objects that include mismatched finishes, salvaged windows, fragile roofing, ubiquitous clotheslines, fragile balconies, and the absence of vehicular access.

CULTURE OF UNCERTAINTY

In this research, economically disadvantaged people were seen to be marginalized by the land-laws and socio-economic barriers that came with industrialization and development. Rural workers who were displaced by mechanization moved to cities where wage based factories raised the standard of living for many, but left others impoverished and isolated, outside the benefits and opportunities of a modern economy.

In the countries that could afford it, social safety nets were created to mitigate inequities, reduce poverty, and provide some level of basic housing. But for governments without the political will or the means to support their poor, a culture of uncertainty rose along with failed politics, power shifts, and a rush for control by a privileged few.

Where ineffective and corrupt governments were unable to offer alternatives, an informal economy then emerged where people moved independently to provide goods and services outside the regulatory controls that limited

**Electrical utilities are investor backed organizations that act with little concern for safety or government policies when it comes to expanding their customer base and providing power to those who can afford their services.*

Materials applied as a straightforward response to an immediate need with no concern for fashion

Power is always available to builders who can pay for service connections*

Objects are installed so that they can be disassembled and reconfigured when and if some other material comes along



Disordered combinations of unpredictable materials are characteristic of this vernacular

Common features include windowless openings, small gardens, clothes lines, and building materials stockpiled for future needs

The vernacular found in an informal settlement reflects the self-determination and inventive solutions of builders using local materials, similar tools, and indeterminate methods found in an environment shared by millions of marginalized people.



It's the irregular and seemingly chaotic applications of random materials that give this house-form its distinctively disordered characteristics. This is an architecture, unique to its social and economic context, that could not be duplicated with formal construction tools or materials.

their survival. Without the costs and constraints of taxes, permits, codes, and bureaucratic oversight, informal economies are able to provide low cost alternatives to marginalized poor. What I found was that these same uncertainties presented an opportunity to those who were either unable or unwilling to take part in formal housing solutions. As builders, they chose instead to take advantage of bureaucratic confusion and weakened oversight, accommodating their needs by assembling shelter in a place that they had taken as a home.

Though far from ideal, they chose to build in an informal economy, constantly challenged by the uncertainties of an increasingly complex world. Assembled strategically, the resulting house-forms were the outcome of an ongoing struggle for survival. Disorder was a reflection of a subtle dance with marginalization just beyond the boundaries of a formal economy, but well within the shared values of an informal community of builders. The underlying uncertainty of life in an informal settlement then worked to shape a vernacular common to the expectations and values of all those who were resigned to endure its limitations.

COMMUNITIES OF UNCERTAINTY

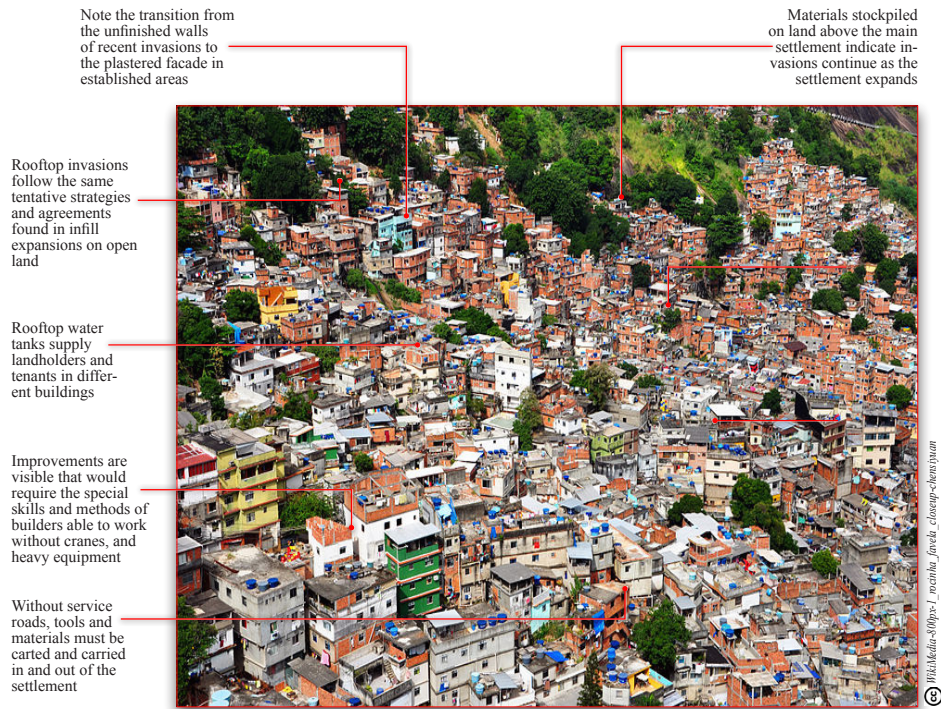
After years working in and around informal settlements, it's increasingly clear that their disordered and chaotic features are a reflection of a collective human spirit, a patchwork of material self expressions, each building representing the determination of its builder in the context of a disordered and uncertain world. When successful, a uniquely deinstitutionalized human form stands as an architecture with none of the regulated order of formal constructions. With no laws to straighten and align, no setbacks to separate and divide, and no bureaucratic agency to dictate right from wrong, buildings are dangerously assembled in direct proportion to face to face interactions and the confidence each individual builder has as a potential landholder.

As such, the underlying culture of uncertainty prevalent in an informal settlement is visible in a variety of disordered forms, buildings stand together as evidence of an almost superstitious sense of hope and optimism. As disadvantaged builders, they hope for steady work, hope for food, and hope to find the resources they need to sustain their lives.



The disorder, unregulated features, and chaotic characteristics of buildings in an informal settlement share none of the refined details or carefully applied materials found in the regulated market system.

**These loosely organized neighborhoods bring to mind what Upton Sinclair called "a collection of little country villages" in the urban slums of the United States in the early 20th century.*



Gentrification is clearly visible in established neighborhoods as colorfully painted buildings. Invasions in different neighborhoods expand vertically onto rooftops, or begin along the upper edges of the settlement on increasingly inferior land.

This is not to say that these impoverished conditions generate tightly knit working relationships. Instead, I found the circumstances shared by informal builders has its own set of unwritten rules for acceptable behavior. First, there's a mutual understanding and unspoken appreciation for the scope of the struggles that are part of life in an informal settlement. Challenges range from day to day survival to an ongoing effort to visibly improve their claim on occupied land. At the same time, there's also a kind of long-suffering tolerance for adversity seen in an ability to endure the risks and indeterminate nature of a community filled with uncertainty.

This is a place where public services are non-existent, nothing is ever finished, and even apparently complete house-forms remain uncomfortably cold or hot, drafty and dusty, enjoying few of the simple luxuries available in a formal economy. The result is a vernacular whose features and common characteristics materially display a continuously evolving balance of uncertainty and self-determination that's an integral part of life in an informal community.

COLLECTIVE CHAOS

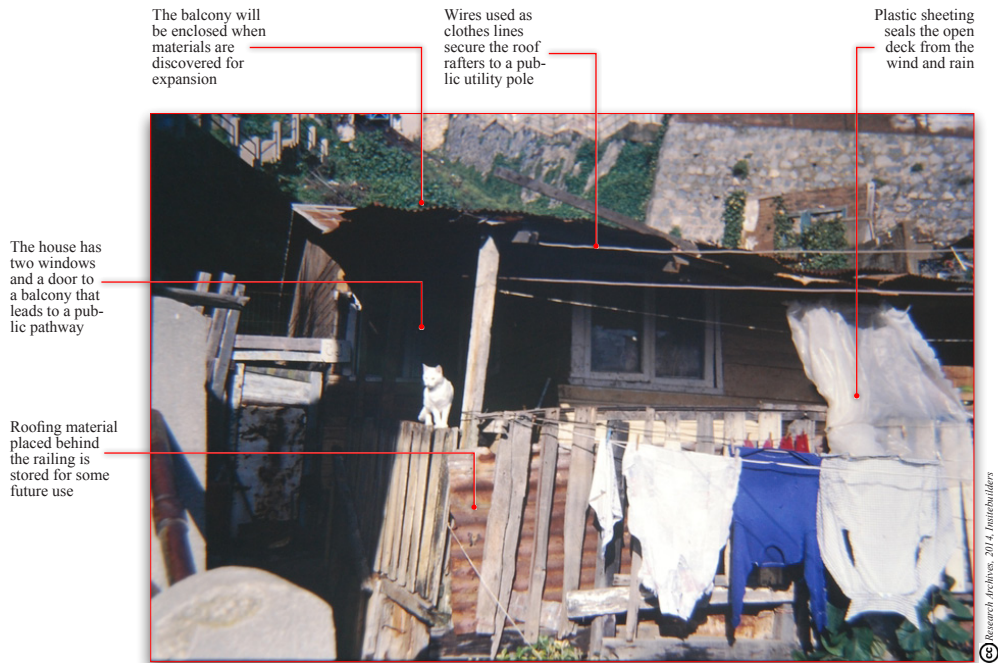
In the end, it seems obvious that we're blinded by aesthetic references that are rooted in our regulated economies. Most philosophers believe we live in a world with an innate sense of physical order. Their premise is that we view objects according to rhythms embedded in the shapes and characteristics of what we see around us in our built environment. Evidence to support this idea is clear, embellishments and ornaments are valued as cultural references, and almost identical fashions are universally applied to enhance the consumptive objectives of manufacturers and developers. This includes the carefully styled buildings that are an integral part of a market oriented social and economic system. In a formal neighborhood, any hint of disorder is seen as an aesthetic failure to be corrected and rebuilt according to higher standards of a regulated design and construction economy.

In contrast, the disorder visible in the chaotic forms of an informal settlement, stand as a backdrop to the informalities



Random materials, uneven surfaces, unfinished edges, and irregular lines reflect the hope, optimism, and challenges faced by informal builders living impoverished lives in a marginalized world.

**Though responses were always guarded, dates and details for these houses came from casual "over the fence" conversations with those who were home during the day. These initial investigations were part of background research conducted prior to planning the protocol for later case studies.*



With luck and determination, further improvements may one day be possible if the builders are able to remain on the land, but poverty and the disadvantages of life in an informal economy are just as likely to mean these conditions will remain for a very long time.

of buildings put together with none of the consumptive incentives of a market based economy. Builders follow no preconceived plan, sculpting shelter from a variety of materials into deconstructible assemblies that do not conform to the carefully aligned geometries of a regulated world.

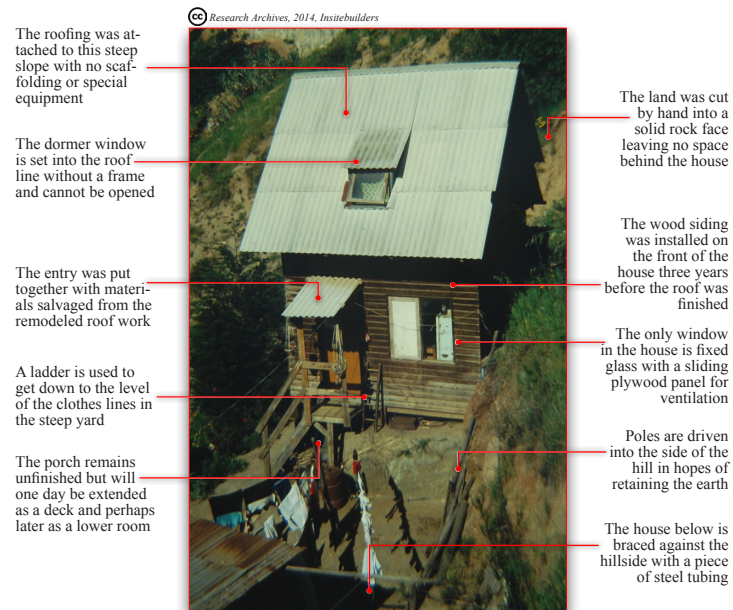
This is an architecture shaped without the pretense of design, a physical-form with none of the aesthetics or stylistic references of a market oriented economy. Raw and uncut, the result is house-form, as the product of a spontaneous and ongoing struggle for survival. As a consequence, the buildings in an informal economy cannot be easily duplicated. In fact, it's the very nature of their irregularity that is evidence of a collective response to their impoverished social circumstance. The chaotic absence of order then becomes the dominate characteristic of shared cultural values. The result is a random, unplanned approach to architecture that generates the uniquely individualized features of this vernacular of uncertainty.

LIFE IS NOT STRAIGHT AND LEVEL

It's also important to emphasize that in a formal economy, buildings are constructed according to codes and standards that reinforce the values represented in a market of style and design. Formalized architecture conforms to social and economic expectations, providing the context for carefully regulated growth and development. Construction is a business, based on materials and systems manufactured to exacting specifications.

The informal economy is the antithesis of formal design and construction. Any attempt to plan or control development is frustrated by unregulated growth, often found in unserviceable and dangerous areas, with house-form assembled intermittently as collections of found objects, enjoying few of the luxuries or protection of straight and level construction. In the world of informal construction, every building is pieced together from the remnants of a regulated economy. Without the time, money, or the materials, tools, and equipment found in the formal sector, it's no wonder that the result is a uniquely disordered vernacular.

But even if formal controls and advantages could somehow be provided to builders in one of these settlements, the pretenses of an ordered affluence would be lost to the unpredictable nature of an informal community. This is a place where the logic of design and construction follow constantly shifting priorities, a place where nothing is certain, everything is temporary, and carefully aligned and fitted finishes are sadly irrelevant.



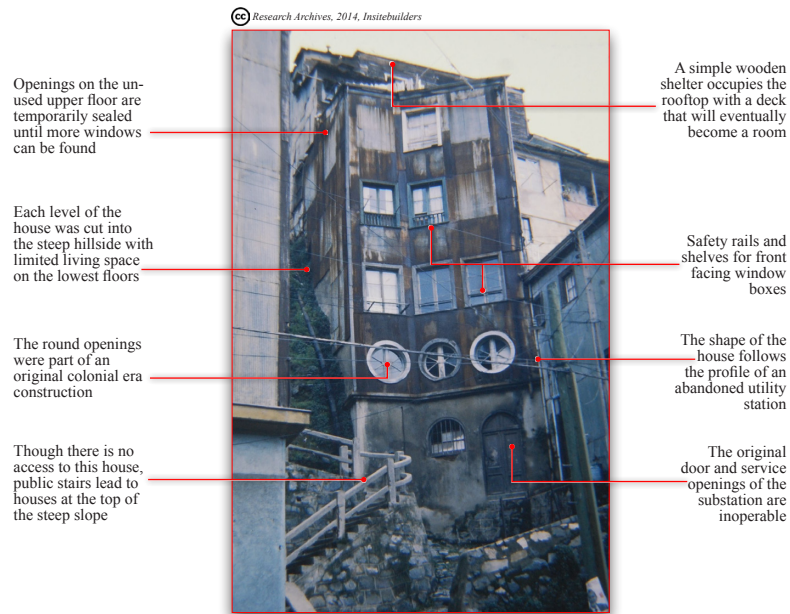
Newer materials add a visible sense of order to the front of the existing structure, but many details and irregularities remain unresolved in the overall house-form.

BEYOND STYLE AND DESIGN

It doesn't take long in an informal settlement to see style and design as extravagances that only those in the more privileged formal economy can afford. For marginalized builders, design is simply not an option. It takes time to dream and draft a design, as well as money for the materials and tools necessary to

build according to a preconceived plan. In an informal economy, style and design serve no real purpose. They're luxuries that distract from basic needs like food, clothing, and education. And though personal touches are evident in all but the most impoverished shelters, decorations and ornaments have nothing to do with providing protection and a warm and dry place for the family to live.

As crude as the results might appear to outsiders, I found that informal builders take a particular pride in their work, especially as higher quality materials are incorporated into a more ordered form. These buildings are a material culture, an architecture in motion, where level floors and plastered walls find their way slowly into an evolving house-form as generations of subsequent builders contribute what improvements they can to the family's landholdings. Like our prehistoric ancestors, if conditions and resources become available to support further development, strategically assembled shelters evolve into settlements with houses transformed by the colors, details, and individualized shapes found in the later stages of this vernacular.



The builders who occupied this space, put together a five story building with salvaged materials and a collection of used windows above the concrete walls of an abandoned utility station.

ENDURING UNCERTAINTY

Unfortunately for informal builders, no matter how long a family manages to remain on occupied land or what improvements they've been able to make over the years, there's always the risk of government action, unemployment, sickness, injury, structural failure, or fire. The challenges are constant, which makes it remarkable that informal communities exist as clean and well kept as they are. Part of this stems from the fact that there is very little waste generated by people with very little to waste. At the same time, even with no organized public services, paths were swept, communal steps were installed, children were scrubbed, and people dressed meticulously for employment as laborers, housekeepers, and office workers.

Neighborhoods within the settlements were also dotted with entrepreneurs who ran stores, cafes, laundries, home schools, and day care centers, with customers and clients ignoring muddy roads and open ditches as they went about their daily tasks. These informal transactions were especially telling when everything in life was reduced to

With no wood, masonry materials are tentatively assembled in a slow and unpredictable process

Informal settlements are found on land that would be impractical for any other type of construction



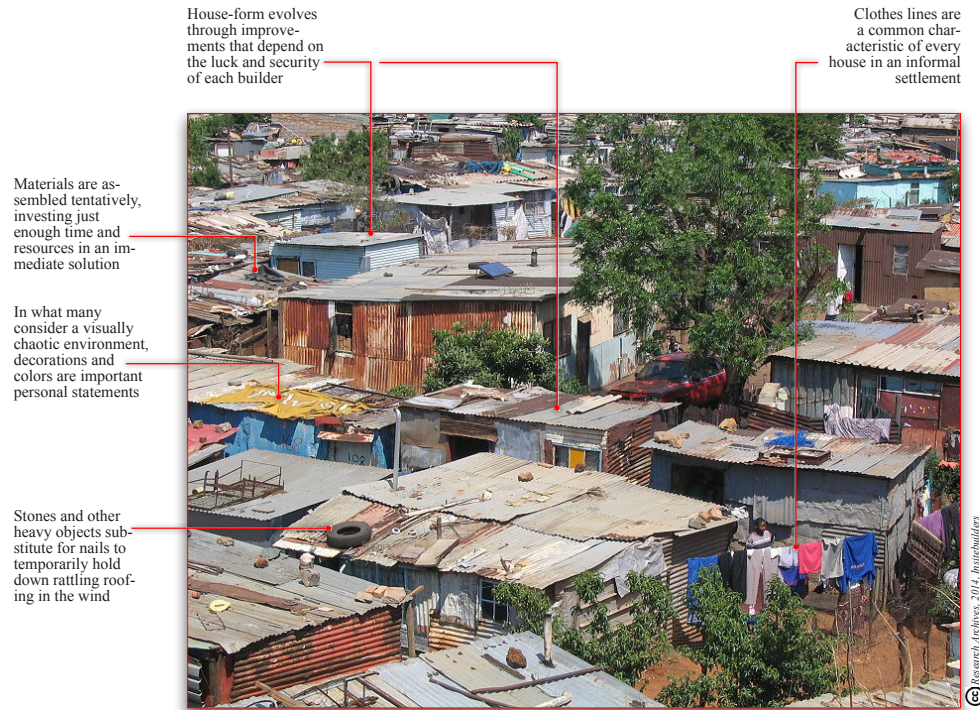
Common materials like concrete and brick-tile reflect a network of informal builders and suppliers

Rooftops are available as open space for future expansion as the settlement grows on the hillside

Structural frames intuitively engineered and erected with immediately available materials and little concern for style or design

© Research Archives, 2014. Informal Builders

Like any vernacular, these houses share materials and processes that result in common features and distinct characteristics that directly reflect their social and economic circumstance.



The discomforts of an impoverished life with limited opportunities is clearly visible in the irregular and random nature of the unpredictable materials and self-taught methods of a constantly evolving house-form.

an uncomfortable and relentless struggle. Even long-standing houses on newly paved streets, suffered with limited power and the lack of sewer and water leaving families with household duties that included collecting and heating water, keeping food fresh, cooking on kerosene stoves, washing clothes by hand, bathing from a bucket, scattering human waste, and dealing with the wind and weather.

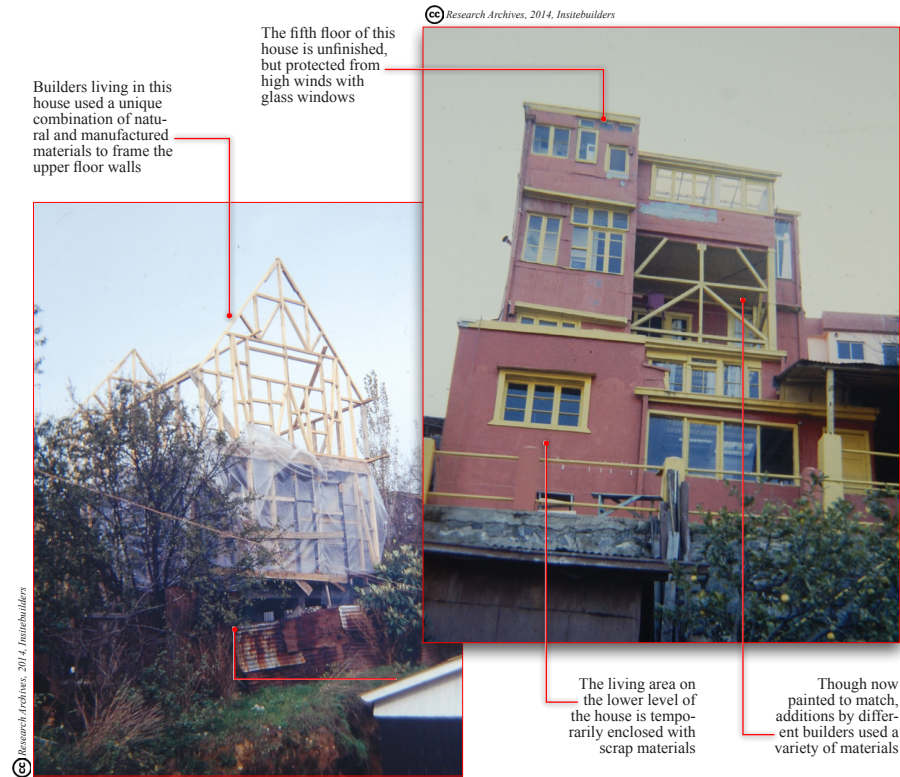
Add to these chores the builders who faced the endless burden of repairing, expanding, and thinking about the next step in an unpredictable construction process. Regardless of the hardships, these self-determined individuals maintained an innate commitment to a place close to the resources they needed to survive. It was, in fact, this ability to endure hardship, inventing solutions, and intuitively adding objects and materials to their claim on the land that gave meaning to the difficulties of their lives. Land as a place to call home was central to the hope that one day life would be better for the generations of their family to follow.

OUTSIDER ARCHITECTURE

I began this research looking for ways to bring order to an architecture that I did not understand. What I found instead was a completely different set of values and motivations, evolving as a house-form, with its own sense of order.

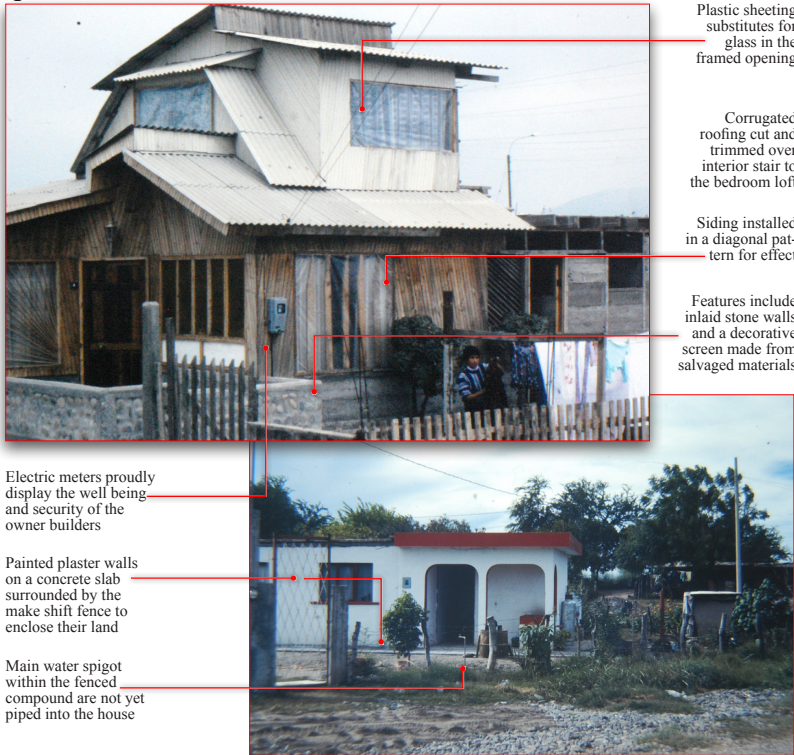
It's obvious that informal architecture is strikingly different from the buildings we see in a formal economy. Where there are wages and values that generate a market for businesses and workers, contractors use computerized management tools to follow plans and specifications prepared by engineers to comply with an array of codes and stylistic expectations. Even the simplest project in the formal sector takes team work, education, and experience.

Builders in the informal economy face an entirely different set of challenges with none of these advantages. They work alone with little or no money and few options. For them, construction begins in any open space, starting as a tentative invasion clinging to a place to survive in an uncertain world. For these builders, a debt-free shelter meant the slightest income could be used for essentials like food and clothing, with spare time and money devoted to finding objects and materials that might be useful in their efforts to add privacy, protection, and comfort to their lives.



Informal builders take intuitive approaches to the use of limited resources, often decorating their creations with expressive combinations of spontaneous details and bright colors, creating a remarkably disordered and fascinating house-form.

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Plastic sheeting substitutes for glass in the framed opening

Corrugated roofing cut and trimmed over interior stair to the bedroom loft

Siding installed in a diagonal pattern for effect

Features include inlaid stone walls and a decorative screen made from salvaged materials

Electric meters proudly display the well being and security of the owner builders

Painted plaster walls on a concrete slab surrounded by the make shift fence to enclose their land

Main water spigot within the fenced compound are not yet piped into the house

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Considered by their proud families as the best houses in their neighborhoods, these builders were able to invest time and their limited resources into a simple building that occupied land that they now considered a permanent home.

Where the initial focus may have once been on day to day survival, architecture evolves as a distinctly unpredictable and indeterminate form. In time and with luck, better materials are then applied over decades to replace tentative solutions, and a once random collection of found objects slowly emerges as the physical result of an ongoing commitment to its place in an informal neighborhood as a home.*

What we see then is an aesthetic that is shaped by uncertainty, built by people living informally in settlements beyond both the protection and constraints of codes and regulations, well outside the stylistic norms and predictable social pretenses of a more consumptive formal economy. Like the buildings found in prehistoric settlements, this is an architecture at the forefront of survival, recognized for the imaginative power of a self-determined human spirit and the beauty of a disordered logic, governed by a will not just to simply survive, but to live in a permanent place that they can call home.

**Despite the challenges of living and working in an informal economy, many houses have a uniquely personalized character, with inventive thought, intuitive craftsmanship, and clear displays of creativity, including simple things like flower boxes, gardens, decorative interpretations, and more complex installations like solar heating, reinforced concrete, and gray water drainage.*

