

Informal settlements could be our cities of the future

SA is one of the world's biggest manufacturers of shantytowns, commonly known as informal settlements

GLEN MILLS

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SHANTYTOWN is the new normal in our cities. SA is one of the world's biggest manufacturers of shantytowns, commonly known as informal settlements. According to official reports, there are about 2700 informal settlements in SA.

SA's population is increasing, our cities are expanding and densifying and, within them, informal settlements are booming as urban newcomers look for jobs and a better life. The informal settlement is a growth sector. But it's more than that. It's a building type that is popular because it suits the needs of the urban poor. It offers choice, it gives people what they want, it enables individual creativity and it is affordable. It is also simple to build and easy to use.

So, a powerful brand — the informal settlement — is in town. And it's reshaping the city. It has mass-market appeal at the bottom of the wealth pyramid because it delivers on the promise of cheap, tailor-made shelter. That's a remarkable achievement in a time of mass-produced, one-size-fits-all housing for low-income citizens and it is why we need to appreciate its complexity and value.

More particularly, we need to get to grips with the architecture of this brand. City managers, politicians and built-environment professionals have to uncover the value it adds to the low-income housing market and figure out ways of leveraging that value for new kinds of urban innovation. How can we absorb this growing brand of city-making so all citizens can enjoy its benefits?

Urbanisation in SA is on the increase, with more than half the population already living in cities. There is a need to recognise and appreciate the economic, social and environmental benefits that informal settlements can bring to the urbanisation process.

But more importantly, we need to understand this building type from a design point of view. It is crucial to the wellbeing of all city dwellers that we expose this design knowledge so a new form of design leadership can emerge and transform the institutionalised practices for creating better cities. Cities are complex artefacts, and how we grow and transform them depends on how well we understand them. Informal settlements, because they are self-reproducing and built by way of grassroots processes, introduce another dimension to that complexity. This adds further impetus to the need for a proper appreciation of how they work functionally and formally.

This is where the history of the city needs to come in because it shows how functional processes and formal products interweave to create urban artefacts of utility. Take a look at the evolution of city design worldwide and you'll see that it's largely the result of a bottom-up process. Lots of design decisions, creating bits and pieces of the city here and there, add up to a built environment that has

a strong sense of spatial and social organisation. This results in an organic-looking town plan that on first inspection appears to be chaotic but in reality is highly ordered.

While there was no centralised concept to guide the development process from the top down, there was a network of design-build efforts based on simple rules that took into account regional circumstances, such as site conditions, local knowledge, topography, the availability of tools and materials, technical skills and climate.

Here's how urban historian Lewis Mumford describes this process in his 1961 book, *The City in History*: "Organic planning does not begin with a preconceived goal: it moves from need to need, from opportunity to opportunity, in a series of adaptations that themselves become increasingly coherent and purposeful, so that they generate a complex, final design, hardly less unified than a preformed geometric pattern." The results are cities that display an ingenious characteristic: each is articulate as a whole but, at the micro level, each of its architectural parts and open spaces is different. There is a continuity of architectural and spatial differences that gives each town its own identity.

Mumford again: "Each medieval town grew out of a unique situation ... and produced ... a unique solution. The consensus is so complete as to the purposes of town life that the variations in detail only confirm the pattern." The same can arguably be said about the socio-spatial patterns that define contemporary informal settlements. So here's the thing: what were once mediaeval informal settlements are vibrant, matchless cities today. They have emerged, over time, as models for best practices in urban design.

Now do this quick thought experiment to appreciate the latent potential in SA's informal settlements for following the same route to urban success. Think of modern-day cities such as Oxford, Jeddah, Siena, Copenhagen, Istanbul or Zurich, and you'll see places with organic-looking deformed grids, bustling economies and vibrant street cultures. Now consider their well-documented histories, starting with their mediaeval origins, impoverished populations, polluted public spaces and squalid buildings. Then imagine a process of continuous upgrading, with evolving technologies and knowledge gradually transforming them into what they are today. You should now get the visual of what can be done to renovate, fairly quickly, today's informal settlements into attractive, functional cities of tomorrow.

Today's informal settlements have the potential for a similar historical trajectory, which can be accelerated because of the knowledge, technologies and data at our disposal. Yes, we can transform and grow our cities in exciting new ways if we harness the innovation and energy of SA's squatters and the informal settlements they create. We can transform most of SA's informal settlements into safe, appealing places.

Architects, planners, engineers, city managers, squatters, politicians, among others, must focus on the positive and formulate a compelling vision of what these settlements can become. We need to see through the squalor and recognise the value, resourcefulness and novelty that lie behind it. Working in partnership with all stakeholders, various kinds of job-creating upgrading processes should then be explored and installed.

If we regard these settlements as pointers to new forms of urban design then, by working with and on behalf of their inhabitants, we can transform and develop these places from the bottom up into decent living environments. The main thing about informal settlements is that they demonstrate ways of city-making that are affordable and sociable. They are constantly emerging through a dynamic, flexible process, moving from "need to need, opportunity to opportunity, in a series of adaptations ".

The imperative for SA to upgrade and transform its informal settlements is without precedent and new institutional templates for their renovation must be found. This will require us to build on our informal settlement brand by harvesting the best ideas from the network of squatter citizens who have already demonstrated ingenuity in the practices and places they have created. Their social agency is extraordinary given its achievements and the harsh circumstances of poverty these people face.

We should be inspired by SA's informal settlement brand. After all, it is the new normal and an obvious starting point for a unique generation of world-class cities.

- *Mills is an independent consultant.*