

POLITECNICO DI TORINO  
FIRST SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE  
Master of Science in Architecture (Construction)  
***Honors theses***

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**[IN]FORMAL JO'BURG. Upgrading of an informal settlement in Johannesburg**

by Anna Perino and Francesca Ronco

Tutor: Matteo Robiglio

The project for our thesis is based on an International Student Design Competition on the theme of “*Affordable Housing in Sustainable Humane Habitat*”, organized by the *International Association for Humane Habitat* (IAHH) for the *12<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Humane Habitat* (ICHH) held on January 2010 at Mumbai.

The student participants were required to identify a site in a city of their own choice anywhere in the world for planning and designing affordable housing for about 1000 families in an urban area which is at present neglected.

We studied different developing cities in the world, each of one with its own problems and contradiction. In the end we chose Johannesburg, where contradictories features are probably more evident than in other developing countries' cities.

It has a population of 3,9 million of inhabitants and is constantly evolving. After apartheid Johannesburg became a sprawling and almost illegible place with a great diversity of experiences, activities and lifestyle, and its challenge is to exploit the great potential of these features.

During our visit of the city we became aware of the strong contradictions of Johannesburg, therefore we decided to choose for our project an informal settlement instead of a vacant brown field. Slums present a peculiar grain which is always the reflection of a complex and developed society. Their social dynamics are to be considered important values on which the whole community is based.

Our project takes form from these dynamics, often ignored by local authorities, leading to destabilizing and destructive relocation policies. Informal settlements are to be considered as developing opportunities and as a starting point to think about new ways of living. We tried to maintain the strength and the complexity of the community as key elements of our project, that could be defined as an *in situ upgrading*, achieved with a process that never leads to a defined solution but only to possibilities.

The project site, Freedom Charter Square informal settlement is located in Kliptown, Soweto. It is closed between the railway line, the Klipsuit River and a highway, which are real barriers dividing formal and informal spaces, areas that are physically and substantially very different.

The informal settlement is characterised by tin shacks divided by irregular streets that makes circulation difficult but are to be considered a great potential for the survival of the social grain of the community.

The project consists in transforming the FCS informal settlement with a sort of microsurgery: each new housing unit (prefabricated wooden module) takes the exact place of the existing shacks. Each dweller can then enlarge and modify his home according to his needs.



Life in the informal settlement at the end of the process

In the middle of this grain a new landmark joins Kliptown with the informal settlement and provides public facilities such as schools, offices, and a clinic. At the same time this new space welcomes informal activities, which are in relation with the residential informal pattern.



Informal activities on the new landmark

The two different scale of the project, the landmark and the informal grain are now both part of the identity of this area and our aim was to reconnect them into a much more complex system, where spontaneity is the main feature.  
The final configuration is only one of the many possible sceneries.



View of one of the many possible sceneries

For further information, e-mail:

Anna Perino: [annaperino@libero.it](mailto:annaperino@libero.it)

Francesca Ronco: [francesca.ronco@libero.it](mailto:francesca.ronco@libero.it)