

Infrascapes: Interstitial Living in the Contemporary Metropolis

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Abstract

Increasing investments on urban and regional mobility leave behind spatial residues and foster dynamic potentials that have not yet been fully scrutinized by current urban research. Spaces meandering infrastructural traffic elements and urban surfaces generate regions of ambiguous character, often described as blighted or decaying. Paradoxically, these regions also offer optimal conditions for a myriad of normally ‘undesired’ urban functions, which are, most of the times, related to intense mobility of people, commercial goods/services and information.

Their distance from the planning authorities’ eyes makes them almost ‘planning fugitives’, while providing a rather convenient freedom for informal mutations. This irregular freedom enables the development of very specific and specialized environments, which would not normally receive proper attention in planning operations. Areas once degraded by infrastructural presence are being silently re-born with a very specific function: heavily connected and ‘unwanted’ commerce, where the grime of hardware retail, car-repair and small industrial activities can freely take place, hidden from fancy neighbourhoods.

The combination of public unawareness of this potential, and the resulting unregulated use of urban ground is even more visible and experienced in Third-World metropolises. This fact influenced the choice of Rio de Janeiro as the empirical object for this work. A city created along a very specific pattern, whose growth is strongly ruled by its radical topographic situation and infrastructural development. These specific conditions led to a linear expansion of the city in concentric vectors.

Entire districts in Rio are dedicated to single types of commerce, with unplanned shopping zones clustering along highways, viaducts, bridges and roundabouts seeking for cheap and very accessible locations, where they can freely manipulate the urban environment for their own purpose. Although the creation of these areas is hardly ever included in the city’s planning actions, they end up eventually gaining official status within society.

This work represents the partial results of a post-graduate research being developed by the author at TU Delft, with funding from NUFFIC, and aims at developing a critical analysis on the outcomes of the afore-mentioned trends on urban morphology and dynamics. It is composed of two parts: a general and local theoretical investigation of the economical, social and cultural backgrounds of this phenomenon, and a ‘responsive design research’ based on the conclusions of the first part. The second part researches and proposes new ways of designing and planning in these mutating and informal environments, taking Rio de Janeiro as the experimental background for it.