

Master class with the Urban Think Tank: the Informal City

January 30, 2009

International New Town Institute, Almere The Netherlands

The Masters during the meeting on January 30, 2009 at INTI in Almere are Alfredo Brillembourg and Hubert Klumpner of the Urban Think Tank from Caracas, Venezuela.

The Urban Think Tank is a multi-disciplinary design practice led by the Venezuelan Alfredo Brillembourg and Austrian Hubert Klumpner. Their working area is the informal city.

“They have deliberately shifted their attention from the formal city of master plans, commissions, clients and international attention, to the informal city, with its slums, its millions of impoverished ‘clients’, its isolation from global capital and its illegal status UTT states that in ‘the global South’ this urban condition is ubiquitous and requires serious study and a different set of design tools in order to design meaningful things. UTT does not condemn the slums as illegal and dangerous, as do the official planning agencies and real estate entrepreneurs. Neither do they pity the slums as refugee camps for the disenfranchised that need to be replaced by something else, as do ngo’s and development-aid agencies. Instead, they describe the slums as another city: just as rich, exciting, sociologically and economically fertile as the formal one, and maybe more so. The informal city is not illegal, it is extra-legal, Klumpner and Brillembourg state; it falls outside of the main organizational networks and possesses no city hall, no post office and no telephone company.”

“The Informal City makes up 50% of the main urban areas in the global south but has completely fallen outside of the architectural and urbanistic attention. It demands and produces another kind of urban design, whose process is the inverse of the formal city.” (Crimson, ‘Facts on the Ground’, *Harvard Design Magazine*, 2006).

Brillembourg and Klumpner describe their work as ‘urban acupuncture’.

“We create pressure points – identifiable centres that will generate a nucleus of development, which will connect with the next nucleus and the next and the next.” For example the Vertical Gym, a structure set on an existing sport field in a highly dens barrio, which has basketball courts, a swimming pool and gym over four levels. “The installation attracted in the first year a monthly average of 15.000 visitors and the crime rate in the area dropped by 35 percent over two years.” (*ICON* 048, June 2007).

UTT believes in self-organisation and participation of the inhabitants in the urban agenda. In the restructuring of Hoograven a post-war neighbourhood in Utrecht, the Netherlands, they are invited to inspire the process of revitalisation. According to

UTT the future of architecture and urbanism is rooted in a new engagement: a city build by his inhabitants. The main instrument in achieving this is the dialogue with all the participants, including the inhabitants.

In their publication *Informal City: Caracas Case* (Munich, New York, Prestel Verlag 2005) the results are presented of an extraordinary urban research project undertaken in the barrios of Caracas. In this publication first-hand observations and analyses are combined with the implementation of test programs and prototypes. In 2008 UTT initiated in cooperation with Columbia University School of Architecture in New York the SLUM (Sustainable Living Urban Model) Lab in which all kind of tools for architectural technologies are being identified and developed for the informal city – spatial, material and informational. The publication *The Informal Toolbox, Slum Lab Paraisopolis* (Columbia University 2008), is one of the results of the SLUM Lab. It includes a series of ‘tactics’ for working in informal settlements.

INTI conference ‘New Towns for the 21st Century: the Planned vs. the Unplanned City’

Alfredo Brillembourg and Hubert Klumpner will be keynote speakers at the INTI conference ‘New Towns for the 21st Century: the Planned vs. the Unplanned City’ which will be held on the 4th and 5th June 2009. In January 2009 they will be in the Netherlands and PhD students/researchers working on urban issues and informality are being offered the opportunity to discuss their work with them. On the 30th of January the Master class will take place in Almere. The Master class allows PhD students/researchers from different disciplines to discuss issues related to their research and to receive constructive feedback in a small group setting. The focus of the Master class will be on the urban issues that derive from the theme of informality and the relationship between informality and planned cities like New Towns. History, cultural identity, economical and social circumstances and politics on local and national level are all part of this multidisciplinary urban discussion. PhD students and researchers of a variety of disciplines are invited to take part in the Master class.

Recommended study material/ literature

- Alfredo Brillembourg, Kristin Feireiss, Hubert Klumpner (ed.), *Informal City, Caracas Case*, Munich, New York, Prestel Verlag 2005
- Slumlab, *The Informal Toolbox, Slum Lab Paraisopolis*, Columbia University, 2008

Websites:

<http://www.u-tt.com/>

<http://www.slumlab.com/>