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Informality as Philosophy: The Indian Street as Urban Theory

* ¹ Piyush Das , ² Zahra Yasmoon , ³ Hourakhsh Ahmadnia , ⁴ Madhumathi A.

¹ School of Design and Architecture, Manipal Academy of Higher Education - Dubai, UAE.

² Assistant Professor Senior Grade II, Department of Architecture, School of Architecture and Design, Vellore Institute of Technology, Vellore, Tamil Nadu, India

³ Alanya University, Turkey

⁴ Professor, Department of Architecture, School of Architecture and Design, Vellore Institute of Technology, Vellore, Tamil Nadu, India

¹ E-mail: rupanpiyush@gmail.com , ² E-mail: zahra.yasmoon@vit.ac.in , ³ E-mail: hourakhsh.ahmadnia@alanyauniversity.edu.tr ,

⁴ E-mail: Madhumathi.a@vit.ac.in

Abstract

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Why one sees spatial informality as failure or why one does not see as a philosophy? This paper challenges the assumption by proposing an idea that informality as a coherent spatial philosophy in everyday Urban life. While modern planning majorly shaped by inculcated foreign rationality, zoning laws etc., majority of Indian Urban areas function through various informal set of systems. One understands the formal planning often lacks in alignment with economic realities, migration pattern, social networks and cultural spatial practices. This paper, while looking at the theoretical premises of the same looks at three aspects such as, (a) illegality to legitimacy, (b) Zoning to mixed used density and (c) spatial planning as adaptive morphology. Through this the paper one establishes that informality as philosophy and a paradigm that might trigger new investigations. The study looks at Vellore, India as case study and apply the theoretical basis and sees the results as novel ideas that may be of relevance. Understanding informality as a spatial philosophy is especially critical now, as rapid urbanization in mid-sized Indian cities like Vellore outpaces the capacity of formal planning systems, leaving millions navigating urban life through logics that conventional policy frameworks neither recognize nor support. The research ultimately aims to reframe informality from a planning problem to be corrected into a generative design intelligence — one that could inform more culturally responsive, economically grounded, and socially resilient urban frameworks for the Global South.

Keywords: Spatial Informality; Urban Planning Theory; Adaptive Morphology; Mixed-Use Density; Informality as Philosophy.

1. Introduction

Urban informality has long been occupied in a very ambiguous position within architectural and planning discourse. Across much of the 20th century, the dominant planning frameworks that are shaped largely through colonial modernity, industrial rationalism, and Western zoning principles, they have interpreted informal urban conditions as symptoms of disorder, illegality, congestion, or institutional failure. Consequently, informal markets, temporary occupation, or mixed-use streets, encroachments, etc., and such spatial practices have often been viewed as deviations from the ideal planned city. Such interpretations, however, reveal a deeper epistemological bias within formal planning itself. The assumption that order can only emerge through regulation, permanence, and fixed spatial categorization. Hence, the everyday functioning of many Indian cities suggests that a different urban reality. Large parts of urban life continue to operate through highly adaptive, negotiated, and temporarily shifting systems that sustain economic activity, social interaction, and cultural continuity. Such as streets transform across hours of the day, thresholds become commercial zones, sometimes residual spaces acquire temporary programs, and activities overlap beyond prescribed land use categories. So, rather than existing in as accidental or chaotic formation, these conditions often demonstrate embedded patterns of negotiation and coexistence. This paper argues that the understanding of spatial informality not simply as a planning problem, but as a coherent spatial philosophy that emerges from urban lived practices. It seeks to move beyond developmental narratives that frame informality as transitional, illegal, or incomplete. And instead, it tries to investigate whether informality constitutes its own logic of urbanism. The research attempts to build its argument through three interconnected theoretical lenses. First, the transformation of illegality to legitimacy, where informal systems often become normalized through collective use and necessity. Second, the shift from rigid zoning towards mixed-use density, where overlapping functions generate economic and social resilience. And third, the understanding of spatial planning as adaptive morphology. Using Vellore, India as a case study, the paper examines how everyday urban spaces function through these informal logics. Through field observation and theoretical interpretation, this research tries to identify

patterns of temporality, adaptability, occupation, and spatial negotiations that are very much embedded in ordinary urban life. At a broader level, the paper tries to contribute to emerging discussions on urban theory from the global South by questioning whether the categories through which cities are traditionally understood remain adequate for contemporary conditions. Having to do that, it proposes that Indian street, in its informal and adaptive character, may itself function as a site of urban knowledge production.

2. Literature Review

Indian cities have long been interpreted through the binaries of order and disorder, so where informality is often reduced to a symptom of planning failure. So this paper tries to argue instead that spatial informality operates as an alternative urban philosophy, one rooted in adaptation, negotiation, mixed-use intensity, and the lived realities of everyday urban life.

So to look at some theories, one of the work of 1960s was by Jane Jacob, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, where she defines the street as a dense, mixed, self-regulating social field. She argues that sidewalks, mixed uses, small blocks, and ordinary everyday interaction, they generate urban order that helps one build the claim that what looks messy to planners may in fact process of its own intelligence (Jacobs, 1961).

In the 1967, by Henri Lefebvre, the work called *The Right to the City*, where urban space is understood as production through social relations, everyday life, rhythms, power, and appropriations rather than merely through plans and regulations (Lefebvre, 1996).

His idea of right to the city that helps because it frames urban life as a participation in the making of space, not passive occupation of officially sanctioned form. Similarly, in the 1970s, there was a move from planned city to inhabited city, where the work by John F.C. Turner in the work *Housing by the People*, it was a major shift where instead of seeing non-state urban development as deficient, he opens the possibility that incremental and resident-led urbanization may work better than so-called centralized delivery in many contexts (Turner, 1976).

In the 1980s, Michael D in the work *Working in the City*, he distinguishes between the city seen from above and the city lived from the below. This distinction is extremely relevant in the Indian case because the planners map city, regularity maps and produces next relations and micro-territories (Certeau, 1984).

In the 1990s, Asif Bhavat, in the work *The Quiet Encroachment of the Ordinary*, here one tries to see how ordinary people make claims on urban space without always using organized political movements (Bayat, 2013). So his concept of quiet encroachment of the ordinary is very much relevant in the Indian context where pending age occupations, incremental extensions, and semi-legal practices are there.

In the 2000, the idea of grey space, legality, and suspended urban citizenship, the work by Oren Yiftachel, he gives the concept of grey space where urban conditions suspended between fully legality and full eviction, between recognition and erasure (Yiftachel, 2009). Informality is not merely outside the law, but often exists in zones of selective visibility and provisional acceptance. Similarly, towards an epistemology of planning, Ananya Roy in 2000, she argues that informality is not simply the residual sphere left outside formal planning. Instead, it is a mode of urbanization and a category produced through state power, inspection, and selective reinforcement. So this becomes illegality to legitimacy because here the work shows that legality and illegality are not fixed binaries. They are actively produced.

In the early 2010, the work by *Occupancy Urbanism* by Solomon Benjamin, here there is a move from neat policy categories that looks at how urban land tenure, infrastructure, and economic life are actually negotiated in Indian cities (Benjamin, 2008). Here, Benjamin is excellent for showing that urban order in India often emerges through occupancy claims, incremental consolidation, and local political negotiation rather than through master plan purity. Similarly, in the Indian context, time is not external, but constitutive. Knowledge and action depend on place, time, and context. So classical Indian thought doesn't treat spaces static. It is always conditioned by time. Cities, rituals, activities are time-bound, and they have a circle, they have a cycle. Space is activated through different parts of the time. Same street can have different spatial reality depending on the time. So the modern planning, static zoning, India is very different than the Indian epistemology where temporal activation of the space is there.

2.1. Gap

Informality is studied as a condition, but not as a philosophy. Most literature treats informality as a problem or a system or as a practice, but almost non-explicitly treats informality as a coherent philosophical framework of space making. There is no articulated theory that asks what are underlying principles, logics, and values through which informal urbanism produces spaces. Similarly, there is a lack of spatial theory, and there has been a big over-reliance on socio-economic reading. So a major issue in existing research is that informality is explained through economics or politics or sociology, but rarely through architectural spatial logic. So there is insufficient work that answers how does informality produce spatial configuration, densities, edges, thresholds, and street conditions. Mixed-use density is described but not theorized as an alternative to zoning. So urban studies acknowledge overlap of work and living, but there is no strong theoretical framework that says mixed-use density in Indian cities is not a failure of zoning, but an alternative spatial logic. Similarly, everyday practices are studied, but not elevated through to epistemology. Existing research also how everyday life produces space, but they stop at practice, improvisation, survival. Can everyday practices be understood as a form of knowledge system, a way of knowing and producing one's space?

2.2. Study Area

The study area is the city of Vellore in the state of Tamil Nadu, India, where in the Brahmapuram village, there is an informal market that happens in every Monday afternoon. That starts somewhere around like 3 p.m. in the afternoon and goes till 8 in the night. That happens every Monday. And that happens in front of a school playground and that also has a temple and some houses and on the main road.



Figure 1. Location of the temporary market in Brahmapuram Village, Vellore, India. Left: Vellore in India, Top right: Demarcation of the temporary market in the satellite image.

3. Methodology

This temporary market of Vellore, the idea of temporal, negotiated, incremental, and informal, the methodology adopts negotiation mapping that looks at permissions, conflicts, tolerance, and displacement, spatial mapping that understands the layout, circulation, edges, encroachments, temporal mapping that looks at the daily cycles, weekly rhythms, seasonals, intensities, activity mapping that looks at selling, storage, movement, overlap, and actor mapping, who are the vendors, users, authorities, and the informal regulators. Through this study, one understands the illegality versus legitimacy, where informal occupation, tolerated presence, semi-recognized use, formal integration, integration are understood, zoning to mixed-use density, where overlapping of functions, work plus dwelling plus circulation, time-based zoning, vertical and horizontal mixing, etc. are understood, adaptive morphology, where incremental growth, flexible boundaries, modular results, and reconfiguration over time. With this idea, one understands the spatial logic, the meaning of porosity, overlap, thresholds, density through coexistence. One looks at social negotiations, informal governance, shared occupation, and distributed control, while one understands the design intelligence.

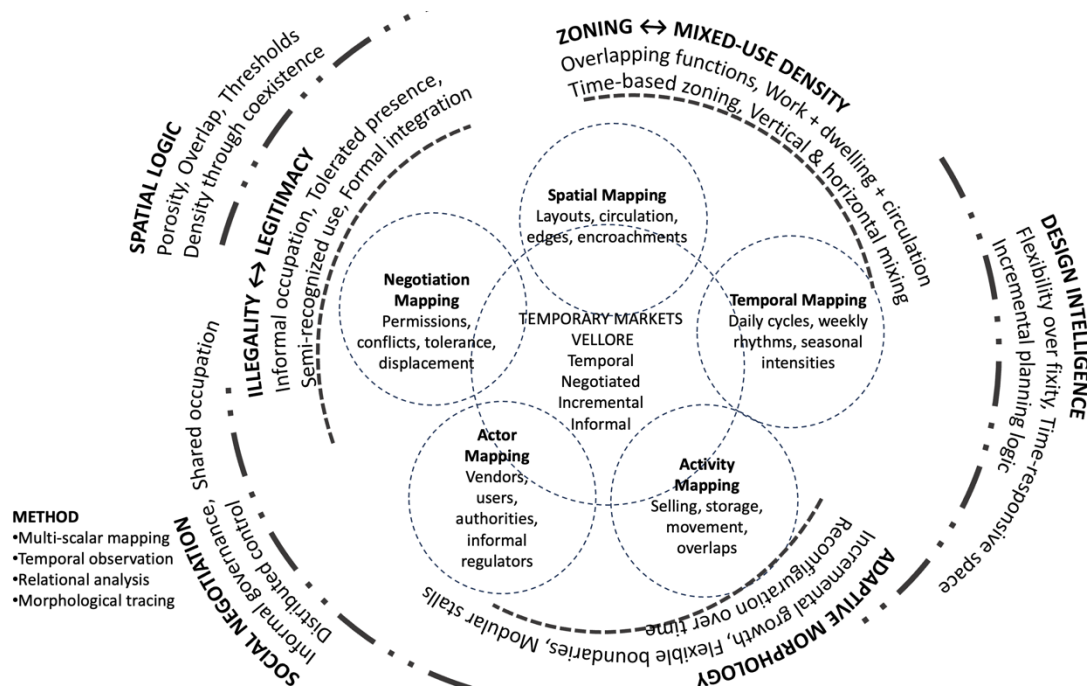


Figure 2. Methodology diagram, Source: Author.

3.1. Site Observations

One of the significant observations from the site and the study was that temporality not just time, but it's the modes of time. Here one understands that there is critical temporality where the weekly recurrence, the market day, ritual calendar because there's a temple linked to it, and the school schedule dependency because the ground in front of the school is also used for the same thing. So here the space is governed by institutional rhythms. Then the diurnal transformation, daytime it's open, diffused, undefined, but evening its structuring begins, night in the evening with the lights and everything. So late night, dissolution, multiple spatial ontologies are there. Then one observes the idea of duration of occupation, short stay vendors, sometimes the medium duration, sometimes the long duration. So time defines spatial stability. Then one understands the idea of the temporal thresholds. When does the market begin? At what density does space flip from public ground to market? And here one understands the event-based temporality. So time is episodic, not just continuous.

The second site observation is the micro-temporality, where the edge-based temporality, edge-based territory formation, and it gives you different edge conditions that produces different spatial behavior. For example, the temple edge is a semi-sacred, slower, stable vendors. The compound wall edge becomes back-supported linear stalls. The road edge becomes high visibility, transient and competitive. The tree base becomes radial, social clustering territory. So these are territories not plotted, but it is anchored.

So these are interstitial territories in between compound and the road. They are not fully public, not fully private, not legally defined.

There are economic logic, for example, in Vellore, so there is a relative measurement system. In the world of BlinkIT and different kinds of apps where, in two minutes you get your groceries at home, but such kind of informal markets in the Indian scenarios has somehow followed a different measurement system. For example, there would be a bundle of vegetables that would be 10 rupees rather than based on certain weights or something, or maybe the three pieces would be of some prices. So they are not strictly kg-based, they are relational pricing, not absolute measurement. Here the idea of flexible quantification comes into picture. Quantity adapts to demand, negotiation, and customer type, and measurement becomes elastic. So this negotiated value where price is not fixed, it is conversational economy where interaction-based transition economy and small denominations, higher turnover, and low entry threshold.

The fourth observation is the spatial-social negotiations, where the non-formal governance, there is no visible authority, yet there is a strong order. The spatial etiquette is understood through the distance maintained, encroachment limits, and that idea that has been understood by the vendors and the users.

The fifth observation is the mobility and the circulation where the desired line movement, there is no fixed path, movements adapt to the intensity. Friction zones where congested nodes, there is a high interactions. Flows slow down interstitially. Circulation is productive, not just movement. The sixth observation is the programmatic overlay where the space is multi

programmed, for example, the school, the playground, the market, the idea of the society, the idea of the economic overlap. And the seventh is the sensory parameters and often ignored, but it is a very powerful point where the sound, negotiation, calling, ambient density, etc., and that makes the space a sensory field.



Figure 3. Monday afternoon temporary market, Brahmapuram Village, Vellore, India. Left: vegetable stalls, Centre: Setting up with cardboards, Right: Setting up a stall along the edge of the street. Source; Author.



Figure 4. Monday afternoon temporary market, Brahmapuram Village, Vellore, India. Left: stalls near the temple, Centre: Space under the tree being utilized, Right: Relative measurement units of vegetables. Source; Author.

4. Findings

Temporality is not an attribute of space, but it is a primary organizing logic. So here, in this case of market, the same ground, the playground becomes a market. Sometimes it's empty, sometimes it's busy. Market exists only within specific temporal windows. Sometimes in the night, artificial lights trigger the spatial activation. The study demonstrates that the spatial order in informal market is not pre-inscribed in form, but emerges through temporal activation cycles, where time functions as a primary structuring agent rather than a secondary condition. Here, it moves beyond time-use studies and proposes time as spatial generator.

Again, informal markets operate through a temporal zoning system rather than spatial zoning. So the school ground used for education during the daytime becomes a commerce in the evening. Temple front alternates between rituals and market. Contrary to modern zoning principles based on spatial segregation, the observed markets exhibit a temporal zoning logic where multiple programs coexist within the same spatial footprint through time-based allocations. Similarly, spatial order is produced through age-based anchoring and industrial occupation. Vendors align along tree-based compound wall, road edge. The in-between spaces becomes the key territories. The formation of informal market space is governed by a logic of age, anchoring, and industrial occupation with spatial order. Emergence not from predefined plots, but from the appropriation of residual and threshold conditions. So here it converts improvement into spatial logic with a very strong architectural relevance. Another finding of this study was that legitimacy in informal market is produced through repetition and negotiation, not through legality. So the weekly recurrence of the same vendors, stable occupation patterns without formal allocation, there are no visible enforcement yet structured order. The study reveals that legitimacy within informal market is not a function of legal sanction, but is continuously produced through repetition, social negotiation, tactic acceptance, forming a gradient rather than a binary condition.

Hence, informal markets exhibit a relational economic system based on flexible measurement and negotiated value, the idea of the 10 rupees bundles, the idea of the quantity that varies by interactions and not standardized price. The economic transaction within informal markets operates through a relational measurement system where the value is dynamically negotiated rather than fixed, challenging standardized.

Again, informal market morphology is incremental, adaptive, and event-driven rather than design. The spatial configuration of informal markets demonstrates an adaptive morphological logic characterized by incremental growth, flexible boundaries, and event-driven recognition configuration, challenging the notion of fixed urban form. Here, the circulation is not planned but negotiated, thus producing productive discomfort rather than efficiency. Movement within informal markets is governed by negotiated circulation patterns where friction and density are not inefficiencies but integral to the social and economic exchange. Hence, informality operates as a distributed design intelligence that are embedded in everyday lives. The study identifies informal market practices as a form of distributed design intelligence where spatial organization, economic exchange, and social coordination emerge through collective, non-centralized decision-making processes.

5. Conclusions

Informality constitutes a coherent spatial system rather than a deficit condition. So here informality markets demonstrate internally constituted logics of organization, indicating that informality operates as an alternative mode of spatial production rather than a failure of planning. Similarly, temporality functions as a primary spatial ordering principle. Spatial organization configuration emerges through time-based activation cycles, producing multiple distinct spatial states within the same physical site. One of the conclusions is that informal urbanism operates through temporal zoning rather than spatial segregation. Programs coexist within shared spatial footprints via time-based allocation, challenging the static land use logic of conventional zoning frameworks. Also, spatial order is generated through age-based anchoring and interest interstitial occupation. Residual threshold and boundary conditions act as the primary structuring elements, enabling the formation of organized spatial patterns without the predefined plots. And finally, informality embodies a distributed design intelligence, rent intelligence, grounded in adaptive morphology. Urban form emerges incrementally through collective non-centralized practices where light objects and human interaction act as the operative infrastructure of space-making.

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