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RESEARCH OF DESIGN AND PLANNING FLEXIBILITY  
BRANISLAVA SIMIĆ, MARCH

# ARCHITECTURE OF INFORMAL SPATIALITY: FROM A FLAT TO A CITY PLAN. RESEARCH OF DESIGN AND PLANNING FLEXIBILITY

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## Abstract

The main research question in this article is should architects and urban planners have to allow some informality of everyday life in the design of the residential buildings or even in the plan for the city? By exploring relations of spontaneous interventions with a rigid and formal design and planning process, this article examines the real flexibility of products of those processes such as a flat or a city. The article examines the informal spatial practices in the three scales of design: a flat, a residential building or settlement and on a city level. All three examples for this research were taken from Belgrade, a capital city of Serbia. The research is based on literature and comparative analysis of planning documentation and illegal interventions. Although architects at the beginning of the design process are starting from people's needs, at the end, do those finished products allow the influence of the spontaneous everyday activities of their inhabitants? Are they just a framework for truly living? Is the over planned living space bad? Is esthetic and form over function and life, in some designs or plans? The article argues that the only balance between planning and informality could be a good result, that no process with the complete exclusion of the other is giving quality outcome.

**Keywords:** planning, informality, flexibility, residential settlement, Belgrade

## Introduction

Flexible design is a form of design which allows for interim feedback that may change the design itself. It refers to any design that isn't rigid or fixed in place and it is different from the "adaptive design".

Design flexibility can allow a building to evolve over time as the user needs change. The flexibility of a building or elements of its design can allow it to be used efficiently despite changes in operational requirements, whereas an inflexible building might become obsolete. Flexibility might include active flexibility, such

as moveable partitions, but can also include the provision of features that are inherently flexible, such as multi-use spaces, open-plan offices, large floor-to-ceiling heights, and high-capacity service voids. Flexibility in the design is the best answer for problems such as informal spatiality of everyday life of inhabitants.

This research is based on ideas of Lars Lerup designing process that he calls *Building the Unfinished* (Lerup, 1977) and it does not imply a physically unfinished object, but to incomplete in the sense that it allows the appropriation of space by a future user. By Lerup, the architect must understand the fact that human behavior cannot be specified and predicted completely. Frampton (1980) also pointed out that it is impossible to design housing that will suit everyone's needs and that it is necessary to create opportunities for personal interpretations of inhabitants. According to him, the architect should provide a structure that could be completed over time, more as a conceptually unfinished project (Frampton, 1980).

By exploring relations of spontaneous interventions with a rigid and formal design and planning process, this article examines the real flexibility of design products such as a flat or a city. The article examines the informal spatial practices in the three scales of design: a flat, a residential building or settlement and on a city level. The main research question in this article is should architects and urban planners have to allow some informality of everyday life in the design of the residential buildings or even in the plan for the city?

### **1. Informal settlements in Serbia**

In 2003, at the international organization Stability Pact for Southeast Europe, which collaborated with the UN- Habitat, it was noted the importance and mass production of the residential settlements without proper formal procedures in the countries of Southeast Europe. Another important source of information on this issue is the Vienna Declaration. Based on the article of the Declaration, it is possible to more clearly describe the appearance and concept of informal construction: „Informal settlements are human settlements that for various reasons do not meet the requirements for legal recognition, exist in all countries and interfere with their economic development. Although there are significant regional differences in occurrence, these settlements are generally characterized by informal or insecure land ownership, inadequate access to basic services, social and technical infrastructure.” (Ferenčak, 2009)

In the opinion of Ferenčak (UN-HABITAT, 2002) the word “informal” is perhaps the most appropriate definition among the previously used (“wild”, “illegal”, “unplanned”), since such individual house construction almost always has some of the elements of legality - land ownership, acceptable structural elements and functionality, and even some of the required planning elements - so that the designation “wild” is clearly not appropriate. On the other hand, these houses are never provided with the complete formal procedures and deviate from the planned city system. Consistent with all laws to date, they are in the present status of illegal construction. However, cases of full implementation of the law have been extremely rare in the last 40 years, indicating long-term official tolerance for informal buildings, weakening the meaning of the term ‘illegal’ (UN-HABITAT, 2002). Informal settlements contribute to urban sprawl because of the tendency to favor one story one household constructions, which means the appropriation of valuable

agricultural land and high infrastructural costs per unit.

Informal settlements today are a widespread phenomenon of urbanization in almost all Serbian cities. According to the Belgrade Master Plan 2021 for the capital of Serbia, informal housing occupies over 43% of the total land attributable to residential use in 2002. This large volume of unregulated land covered by the construction of very low densities, without built infrastructure (especially road network and sewage), unregistered for any tax or contribution to city funds - is one of the major economic problems ahead of the city (Belgrade Master Plan 2020, 2009).

### **1.1. Socio-historical context - reasons for the emergence and development of informal settlements**

To explain more clearly the severity of the problem and the amount in which this construction is represented, it is necessary to give an overview of the socio-historical aspect in which it was created.

In Yugoslavia, during the first phase immediately after the Second World War (1945-1960), the social and political goal of ensuring a level playing field for all working people, led to the expropriation of private land and apartments and in harmony with this, often the imposed allocation of space among new and old city families. The reference legal framework was the Basic Regulation on the General Urban Plan of 1949 (UN-HABITAT, 2002). One of the consequences was the minimum standards for housing. In the 1960s there was the emergence of informal construction in major cities of Yugoslavia. By the mid-1980s, such construction was localized to peripheral urban areas, outside of a continuously built urban area. The owners of agricultural land sold the parceled land as construction land because it was significantly more profitable than the use for agricultural purposes. The law did not allow such transactions, but the authorities did not punish the owners for the unlawful conversion of agricultural land into construction land (Milić, 2004).

In the 1970s, local and republican authorities funded a large number of examples of informal construction, seeking a way to stop its spread. These studies have explained the key causes of this construction:

(1) The unresolved housing issue of a large number of families in cities who were unable to obtain social housing for use - then the only legal solution to housing,

(2) Lack of a housing market, poor housing supply, high rents, and unregulated tenant status;

(3) The scarce supply of communal-equipped building plots for individual residential construction, their high cost, complicated, time-consuming and expensive procedures for obtaining the numerous approvals required to obtain a building permit.

The findings from sociological surveys were not sufficient for state authorities to undertake major changes in urban and housing policy, and in particular to abolish the state sector monopoly on housing, change urban policy, property status and the regime of land use. The measures used to combat illegal construction were strictly restrictive - banning this type of construction, threats of fines and imprisonment, demolition - and thus could not produce results, as such residential construction was motivated by the resolution of an existential issue, that is, providing a roof over their heads (Milić, 2004). The government institutions these unplanned extras in

the cities ignored completely allowing them to grow. It was politically feasible to leave that status as it is since the officially proclaimed goal of “free social housing for every family of workers” could not be met either in expectations or in real needs for the majority of the working population.

After the fall of socialism was a period of an explosion of illegal, unplanned, informal spatial practices occurring through Serbia as visible signs of Yugoslav federation's breakdown and grey economy (Kušić et al, 2013). In the 1980s the Belgrade government introduced the so-called temporary permit based on the builder was able to upgrade and adapt the existing facility, as well as to build new smaller facilities. At the same time, abuse of regulations was started very quickly, with a significant role played by city and municipal services. As a particularly significant cause of informal construction, experts point out the migration influx of refugees from the former SFRY republics (from 1992-97), as well as internally displaced persons from Kosovo and Metohija (after 1999). In the process of integrating them into local communities, many provided themselves with housing exclusively through informal forms of construction. At the time of economic and political crises and instability, investment in illegal construction become a business for obtaining illegal economic profits. For example, with incomplete legal and regulatory apparatus in transition, it was cheaper and faster to build informally and wait for legalization. In such a situation, informal construction had clear political advantages, lack of incentives for change.

Presently, according to government acknowledged figures, 1.3 million illegal structures are estimated to have been built across the country. The trend started to rise sharply in the mid-1990s, when the number of illegally built dwellings for the first time equaled those built legally (Petrović, 2001). In the early 1990s, this process involved the withdrawal and almost complete loss of influence of state institutions on the development of the city. The collapse of state-controlled city functions involving commerce, housing, and public transport was reflected in the eruption of informal practices as a form of compensation. Soon the whole system, which maintained the balance between public and private in a modernist socialist city, was replaced by a system of vague rules, with the features of the informal and the private.

## **2. The First example: formal vs. informal urbanization**

Contemporary City Research Institute ETH Studio Basel in 2006 started a project under the name 'Belgrade Formal/Informal: Exploring Urban Transformation' which resulted in publishing a book. In this book, students and teachers have investigated and researched both formal and informal built constructions during the time and different historical epochs. The results of the study show the character of urban change that goes from the modern capital of a large state through the tragic years of sanctions, economic and political decline when informal influences become a very important determinant of its urbanity influenced by global flows. The result of the interaction between formal and informal forces in the urban environment and the diverse architecture resulting from these influences have also been investigated (Dapuzzo, 2013).

As an example of the very formal urbanization of the huge part of the city, New Belgrade was chosen. In the years after the Second World War, the construction of



New Belgrade was started as a new urban center. By the way of its development, New Belgrade represents a separate part of Belgrade, a “city in the city”. Conceived and built in an empty territory as a “city-symbol of the new state and ideology”, New Belgrade was also a city-polygon, where principles of modernism and the ideas of the functional city inspired by of Le Corbusier were achieved. New Belgrade represents a relatively pure and rare example of consistent construction in the spirit of functionalism and Modernism (Blagojević, 2007).

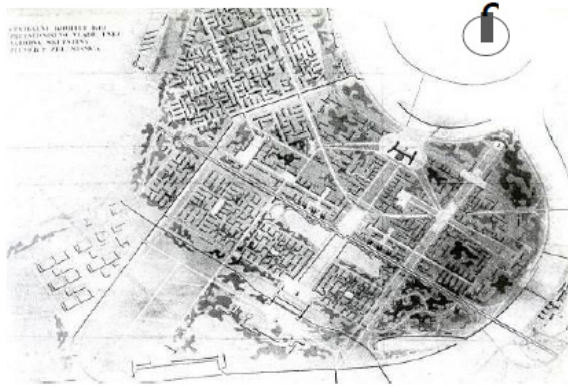


Figure 1. A conceptual plan of architect Nikola Dobrović for New Belgrade 1948 (<http://contemporarycity.org/2014/04/belgrade/>)

A new stage in the development of New Belgrade marked the 1950 year where the idea of New Belgrade as a governing city was abandoned. Instead, the program priority in the coming period becomes public housing for the working class. Ongoing political reforms that sought to resolve the socialist contradiction of collective ownership and individual liberties as equitably as possible, as well as the gradual increase in technical capacities that led to the rise of standards, at a time when high housing demand dictated the pace of construction, led to acute instability of the planning system and realization, so none of the plans were fully realized. That way the parts of New Belgrade, as consequence, stayed unfinished. New Belgrade has become a city made up of various unfinished parts, just like a whole Belgrade. However, according to Blagojević exactly that “its unfinishedness becomes its main potential” for future development (Blagojević, 2007), even though that urbanization did not come in the direction that modernist urban vision left. The role of urban planning was dramatically diminished in the post-socialist period. Some of the rigid and over a formal aspect of planning were strictly separated urban activities and the wide transport routes contributed to the division of the city into separate enclaves. Today as a consequent the residents refuse to use space as intended, so many physical changes have been taken for reestablishing vernacular qualities. In New Belgrade, there was an investment-driven decision-making practice, so-called “investor urbanism”, which focused on highly visible individual projects (such as the largest shopping center) rather than urban space and the city. But it could be said that modernist urbanism gave the main form and functionality of the space that remains recognizable and despite all the non-formal interventions in it. It

remains to defy overtime proving that long-term planning in modernism, despite all criticism, at the end has yielded good results. In the book, they call it instability of formal construction, so it could say that when it was planned was very rigid and too formal, but during the time it showed its flexibility.

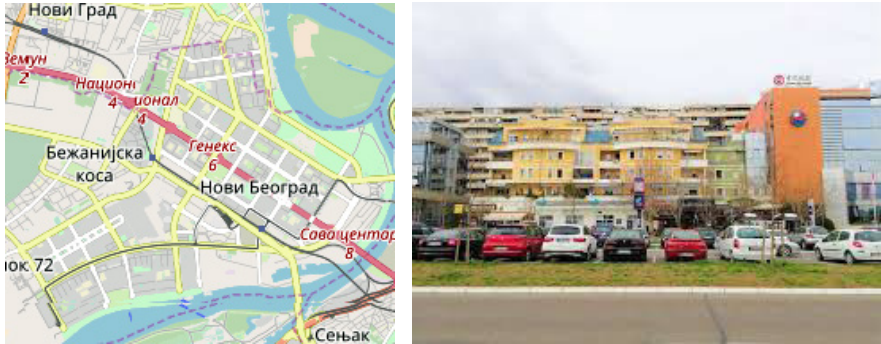


Figure 2. New Belgrade—the legacy of modernism and post-socialist planning

On the other hand, the model of informal construction, defined as early as the socialist period with the rapid expansion in the early 1990s, is presented in a chapter in the book explaining the anatomy of the development of the suburban settlement of Padina.

For this paper, a huge illegal settlement Kaludjerica was taken as an example as it is the largest and the oldest illegal settlement in Belgrade region, and some authors claimed to be the largest illegal settlement in Europe. The urban structure is irregular and spontaneous developed from bottom up without urban plans and regulations, through the daily struggle of its citizens for living space. The traffic network is irregular and insufficient. Except for the electrical network the infrastructure mostly does not exist. Streets are narrow, without drainage and often lined with a large slope where driving is difficult. There are no sidewalks for pedestrians. Other main problems include lack of public spaces and services such as schools, health, and kindergartens (Simeunčević et al, 2012).

Opposite to general definition, informality in Belgrade is not a social margin phenomenon, but a practice pursued by both the social elite and the middle class in a situation where public institutions are unable to control the growing private ambitions that seek to achieve the usual standards of business and housing. These areas are not insecure and do not resemble slums, favelas, not even Roma settlements. There are efforts to achieve order and uniformity. Instead of withdrawal, informal construction has done just the opposite: it has caused a gradual transformation of institutions and accommodation within the laws and processes currently leading to comprehensive legalization. In this way, the informal construction of Belgrade is more similar to the contemporary model of neoliberal deregulation of city development than to the model of poor settlements in developing countries (Dapuzzo, 2013).

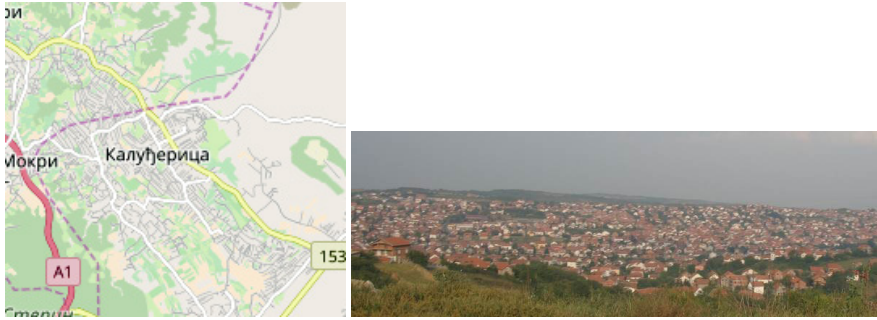


Figure 3. Kaludjerica—the largest illegal settlement in the Balkans—the legacy of socialist and post-socialist planning

Considering the character of Belgrade’s urban changes in the last fifty years - from socialist centralized planning to post-socialist chaotic free-market construction, a certain scheme is established for understanding the specific process of Belgrade’s development. This project compared the **stability of the informal construction model and the instability of the formal model** and raised questions about how this intricate complementary relationship can become the basis for establishing new urban development strategies (Dapuzzo, 2013). The authors of the book do not expose this strategy, leaving Belgrade residents to find it themselves, which also represent one form of openness and flexibility.

Another article that also researched relations of spontaneous interventions with highly formalized designs „Patterns of everyday spatiality: Belgrade in the 1980s and its post-socialist outcome” by the authors Kušić and Blagojević (2013) examines not only the rise of informal spatial practices in the areas left in the shadows of socialist planning system, in Belgrade in the 1970s and 1980s, but also they explored some highly formalized, planned attempts at emulation spontaneous practices in large housing projects. The article argues that many of unsolved contradictions of the socialist period can be seen as a seeds of those practices which have been part of post-socialist transition and its spatiality from the 1990s onwards: indifference toward self-management, cynicism of everyday in the blind spots of socialist society and the planning profession’s failure to deal with the post-socialist city through unrelenting consumption of the common space (Kušić et al, 2013).

### 3. The Second example: residential building informality

As a second case study for this research, social housing was taken as an example of residential living where formal norms and rigid standards for minimal dimensions in a designing process led to predetermined structures. Minimal conditions for social housing are a consequence of the financing by state and subsidized rental of housing to vulnerable population groups. Architect Stojanovic argue, in his doctoral dissertation “The role of the non-determined model in sustainable social housing design”, that the model of indeterminacy in the process of designing necessary. He points the need to change the design standards of social housing and to involve users from the very beginning, which, according to him, creates greater flexibility of the housing units and enables better comfort and quality of housing (Stojanović, 2015). Typical solutions have led to a decrease in the quality of housing due to

the inadequacy of norms and standards to the dynamic and developmental needs of the family. Standards are made a long ago and need a long process to upgrade them, and modern lifestyles, due to technological and technological advances, are changing every day, so the norms for minimal dimensions cannot keep up to date with these changes.

In the early 1960s, there was a growing awareness that conventional design practice lacked a fundamental connection between the values advocated by architects and the needs and customs of users. The consequence was a series of reformist movements that would transcend the divergence between architects and social life (Frampton, 1980). In modernism, this was somewhat neglected and the subordination of satisfying the clean and simple function of the apartment. However, criticism was based on the idea that architecture should be an expression of society, everyone could have the opportunity to express themselves, to create their way of behavior and life (Stojanovic, 2015).

The goal is to design space that allows the events and activities to play on their own.

The quality of housing is reflected in everyday life and not in the formation of physical structure.

In such structures, it is necessary to provide common spaces that will be left to users for free interpretation during use. This result was also researched and argued in a Ph.D. thesis of the author Liberatus Mrema where he pointed out that public open spaces display qualities of informal settlement which enhance the use of a place and promote identity (Mrema, 2008). The housing structure needs to be adapted to be flexible to the specific requirements of the user.

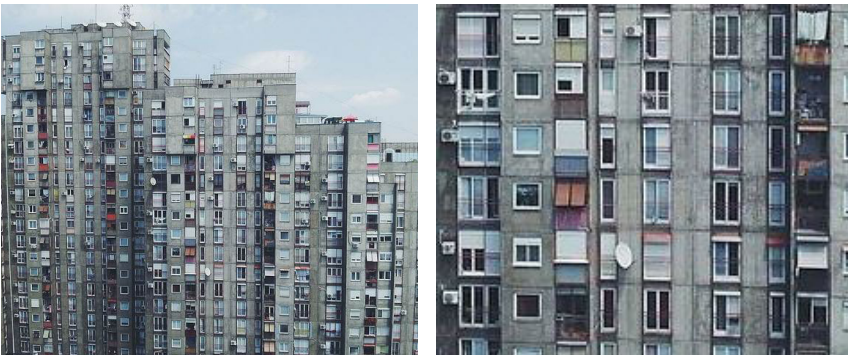


Figure 4. Adapting the space to the needs of users – New Belgrade residential building (<https://www.pinterest.com/pin/144185625554384392/>)

Previously the most important method to solve urban housing demands was public housing, which requires financial resources, huge empty unbuilt plots, the modern building industry, and a well-functioning planning system. Usually, these preconditions have not been in a place. For the majority of the urban population, there was no housing provision at all, so informal settlements continued to grow. In order to increase house production and reduce housing costs the idea of 'low-cost housing' and minimum standards were often set as central government levels for application countrywide (Vestbro, 2012). Developments outside the planned

city are seen as a rejection of modernism. The modern apartment blocks are often transformed by illegal or semi-legal extensions. Transformations include division of rooms for more privacy, additions of balconies, constructions of loggias to acquire more space and building new rooms at ground level for residential or income-generation activities. These transformations increase densities, provide for variations of facades and augment resident's attachment to their housing environment. Modernism in architecture and planning included strong development components such as care for functional standards, daylight in rooms, cross-ventilation and other health-related aspects. All these factors are highly relevant, but the modernist model must be revised to meet local needs, as time has shown. On the other hand, those are the main problems in informal settlements where high density makes the environment unhealthy since rooms lack daylight and ventilation. (Vestbro, 2012)

Many among architects, urban planners and experts in construction management often advocate radical solutions - the demolition of this type of structure, even though their number and size leave no alternative but to annex these zones to regular urban status. The most common reasons are that illegal construction directly offends and threatens them in the professional domain (Ferenčak, 2009). Politicians do not usually delve into the lengthy and intricate process of remediation since clearly considering the likelihood of removing existing units, there is very little chance of this happening. Demolition costs are very high. Belgrade did not have the money for this in 2009, and other cities and municipalities even less (Mučibabić, 2010). In Belgrade in the 2003 over 150,000 applications were received for the legalization of buildings without a building permit. This could be related to about 200-300 thousand voters with some interest in these issues, which may explain the caution of political circles in the actions around this matter (Petovar, 2005).

Socio-economic and demographic realities are common to citizens who resort to this type of construction, informal one. If illegal builders and users had not acted in this way, they probably would not have had any apartment, their own family, nor the prospect of survival and prosperity in the city, and society would have had to deal with this huge and insurmountable problem. It is indisputable that a smaller but particularly striking number of cases is an unscrupulous attitude towards the appropriation of public goods, disrespect for the legal order and civil decency.

#### **4. The Third example: design flexibility of the flat**

For the research about design flexibility, it was taken a flat at Cerak Vinogradi in Belgrade, designed in a skeletal constructive system during modernism 70ties in a period of mass public housing. The system of columns allows architects to create an open space organization that is not restrained by too many walls.

As the author of the residential settlement architect Marušić referred, in the program of investors (The Army and The State, at that time) different structures of apartments appeared as well as different norms that regulated the size and equipment of housing units (Marušić, 2010). Housing units for two, three, four and five people are designed. In the conditions of demanding program conditions of the investor, regarding the diverse structure of apartments, the construction IMS system in this example showed openness to different variations of functional-organizational schemes. The feature of the skeletal system is released, which frees up space in two directions, along the "x" and the "y" axis. Openness along the "x"

axis allows two cases of flexibility. In the first case, “Apartment with two centers” merges a larger and smaller apartment. From the four apartments, this way two are created. The space of a larger apartment, where a family of four lives, joins the space of a smaller, adjacent apartment. A new “center” is being formed - a daycare center for school-age children. The space of the first “center” remains for parents and is enriched with new facilities. In the second case, “Three Generations” are also merging a larger and smaller apartment. Spatial changes within the framework of the architectural assembly follow the future sociological projection; married son (or married daughter) with wife and baby move to a smaller apartment. The young parents’ apartment functions simultaneously as an independent unit and as part of a new large apartment that has been inhabited for three generations.



Figure 1. The flexibility of the flat ( source: Marušić, 2010)

Although such a design, which envisages several use cases, has been designed and conceived in detail, the problem remains of its implementation, because in the socio-economic context that followed in Yugoslavia in late 80ties and 90ties, with post-war poverty and volatile economy, it was impossible to buy a part of the apartment from a neighbor or even the whole apartment next to flat that family are living in. Therefore, this flexibility remained only a utopia and the practice of daily life showed that many families often live in an apartment designed for two. Even though the incorporation of flexibility into the design of a building took place early in the planning phase of a project, it showed it was overplanned for the socio-economic context and habits of its residents in the future.

## Conclusion

This paper emphasizes the importance of flexibility in design or urban planning on the example of informal spatiality. Informal spatiality and everyday use best shows all shortcomings of too rigid and predefined design processes.

Explaining the pattern and genesis of informal type of construction indicates that it is a complex phenomenon and that informal housing units and settlements differ in their physical, economic, social, proprietary, legal, hygienic and other characteristics. Experts point out that the degree of manifestation of this phenomenon directly points to the weaknesses of the system, which are reflected in the lack of national housing policy, the state of the housing / real estate market, the lack of an adequate legal framework and institutional solutions, sectorized integration, etc. From a legal point of view, it is about legalizing ownership and enabling other rights arising from ownership to be exercised. In economic terms, this is an opportunity to strengthen the budget through the future levying of tax on legalized real estate, as well as to stimulate the secondary real estate market, that is, to adequately capitalize city rent in urban areas with informal settlements. From a social point of view, the aim is to improve social security as well as to improve the hygiene and social standard in these settlements. Therefore, the principles of flexibility in the planning and design in these spatial units is very important in the regulation and control of future construction projects.

The incorporation of any anticipated flexibility into the design of a building or a city should take place early in the planning phase of a project. The earlier that decision is made, the easier the implementation and the greater the potential benefit. As a project develops, it can become increasingly difficult to incorporate strategies for flexibility. In the planning phase, initial feasibility studies, future projections and long-term plans should be used to inform the development of flexibility strategies. If the project has end-users who are known, it is vital to consult with them as a means of identifying the forms of flexibility that would be most beneficial to them. Once flexibility objectives have been determined, the design team can review potential strategies and evaluate them based on their suitability for the project. No designs can take accommodate every possible future requirement, so the design team must carefully evaluate those that likely to be the most beneficial and the least disruptive. The expression of individual needs as much as possible and their implementation in the design process is necessary to exclude the assumption of generalized needs and thus to create the conditions for building an appropriate and desired environment. The user who during the design process introduces his needs into the future personal space, creates an identity and identifies with the construction of his territory and has a more pronounced impression of ownership over the space. Indeterminacy a design model offers multiple solutions that enable architects to see the changes that take place under different societal needs. The article argues that the only balance between planning and informality could be a good result, that no process with the complete exclusion of the other is giving quality outcome.

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