

Chapter 40

Seeking Disciplinary Relevance in the Informal City: Rebuilding Architectural Practice through Community Engagement



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Abstract Building is a crucial act for residents of informal settlements. Notwithstanding this normative architectural practice finds it challenging to engage with the socio-spatial complexity inherent to the collaborative making of buildings in informal settlements. This chapter seeks to explore how architectural practice can be rebuilt through community engagement so as to find disciplinary relevance in the informal city. In this exploration, I engage with architects who have experience with multi-disciplinary projects that straddle the formal and informal, who engage in an impure and hybrid mode of architectural practice that is grounded in its context—a grounded architectural practice employed as liminal space, where the contradictions between the formal and informal can be addressed and resolved. I approach this search for disciplinary relevance as an urban geographer seeking to understand the reality of informal settlements, as well as an architect wanting to transform the built environment in a way that improves the lives of marginalized residents. Nonetheless, this exploration focuses on the rebuilding of architectural practice through community engagement, rather than imposing normative architectural practice onto the informal city. The exploration is situated in the context of Cape Town, and employs two case studies that offer a view of architectural practice and community engagement as urban socio-spatial phenomena characterized by a high degree of informality.

Keywords Grounded architectural practice · Informal settlements · Community engagement · Activity theory · Developmental work research

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projects that straddle the formal and informal, who engage in an impure and hybrid mode of architectural practice that is grounded in its context—a grounded architectural practice employed as liminal space where the contradictions between the formal and informal can be addressed and resolved.

In post-apartheid South Africa, the nature of architectural practice and community engagement is influenced by the imperative to recognize and reinforce the spatial agency of marginalized residents. In practice, this requires architects to advocate on behalf of residents of informal settlements, often engaging with them long before and after the conventional duration of professional service. The focus of this research is on the rebuilding of architectural practice through community engagement, rather than imposing normative architectural practice onto the informal city. This exploration is situated in the context of Cape Town, and employs two case studies that offer a view of architectural practice and community engagement as urban socio-spatial phenomena characterized by a high degree of informality.

Problem Statement

African cities are predominantly informalized with residents having to rely on their own efforts to secure livelihood and shelter.¹ This is the inevitable result of rigid (and often outdated) formal urban development processes that are insufficiently responsive to demands for urban change. Subsequently, for residents who are spatially excluded and economically marginalized, the only viable option to sustain an urban livelihood is to disregard formal processes. The resulting socio-spatial complexity leads AbdouMalik Simone to describe African cities as:

... characterized by incessant flexibility, mobile, and provisional intersections of residents that operate without clearly delineated notions of how the city is to be inhabited and used. These intersections ... have depended on the ability of residents to engage complex combinations of objects, spaces, persons, and practices. These conjunctions become ... a platform providing for and reproducing life in the city.²

Architects are compelled by their central role in society—as spatial experts with a responsibility to foster the greater good for all—to actively explore ways to support informal settlement residents in their attempts to secure a better living environment.³ Notwithstanding continued calls for engagement, the architectural profession remains marginal to such endeavors in Cape Town, and indeed in the whole of South Africa. By and large, architects fail to support resident-driven initiatives, and find it challenging to engage with the socio-spatial complexity inherent to the collaborative making of buildings in informal settlements.⁴ Working in the context of this complexity requires additional engagements that are not codified to the same extent as the rest of standard architectural service. There exists a need to describe such engagements in order to broaden the definition of architectural practice.

In my work, I refer to this broader mode of practice as “grounded architectural practice” (GAP). GAP entails border crossing: a form of professional suicide that

has the potential to energize both scholarship and practice by encouraging radical transgressions in professional thought and practice.⁵ Edgar Pieterse describes the challenge inherent in border crossing as being able to achieve a balance between “the straightjackets of professional norms and codes” and “getting lost in the rabbit hole of transgressive insurgency.”⁶ Only once this balance has been found can contextual solutions that work in the present and add up to structural change in the future be developed. For architects, this includes proactive engagement with residents to support the upgrading of their informal settlements.⁷ Such engagement holds the potential to rebuild architectural practice: to resist its present marginality by empowering residents and recognizing them as equal partners in the production of the built environment.⁸ This recognition will require a blurring of the notions of formal and informal—negating the artificial boundary that separates the two—allowing procedural as well as everyday activities to inform architectural practice.^{9,10}

Methodology

In order to explore how normative architectural practice can be rebuilt through community engagement, I have conducted a case study analysis of two completed projects in Cape Town that offer a view of architectural practice and community engagement in contexts characterized by a high degree of informality. The two projects are the Harare Library in Khayelitsha by Charlotte Chamberlain & Nicola Irving Architects (CCNIA) and the Dunoon Library by the City of Cape Town (COCT) urban sustainability unit. Libraries were deemed a suitable building typology to inform the exploration into GAP as they involve a range of institutional role players (e.g., local and provincial government, library services, and library material sponsors), and by virtue of their community-focused role, which also requires consultation with a number of local stakeholders (e.g., business and community forums, local schools, and daycare center organizations).

Semi-structured interviews with the project architects were central to community engagement and design development processes. The interview questions focused on the everyday actions and negotiations that occurred during these two interrelated activities, and attempted to explore the many related practices they involve. This form of research is sensitive to the oppositional practices of residents toward local government and enables the development of “richly textured narratives” that “thicken our conceptions of urbanism.”¹¹ Furthermore, it facilitates an understanding of the “contingent universals” of any situation: both the specificities of place and that which can be shared across other contexts.¹²

In order to structure and analyze the interview data, I employ the principles of activity theory (AT) and developmental work research (DWR). AT is concerned with “doing in order to transform something,”¹³ and posits the activity system in Fig. 40.1 as a unified dynamic whole that constitutes the minimum meaningful context for understanding human actions.¹⁴ The first generation of AT introduced a triangular model of a “complex, mediated act” consisting of a subject, an object, and a mediating

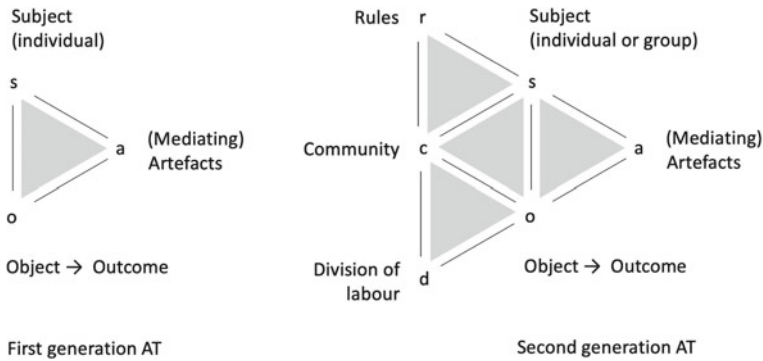


Fig. 40.1 First two generations of AT: a mediated act and its social context. *Diagram* Rudolf Perold, adapted from Yrjö Engeström, “Developmental Work Research: A Paradigm in Practice”

artifact. The agency of the subject—an individual or a group—is the point of view employed in the analysis, with the unit of analysis being an object-oriented and artifact-mediated activity system framework that enables the mapping of activity as it unfolds over time.¹⁵

Within this framework, *objects* are understood as being raw materials, conceptual understandings, or even problem spaces at which the activity is directed so as to achieve the *outcome* desired by the *subject*.¹⁶ The dynamic yet indirect relationship between the subject and object is mediated by *artifacts*, which can take the form of physical tools, cognitive signs or symbols, other people, or even processes.¹⁷ Artifacts both alter and are altered by activity and their properties are developed over time, as they are employed by different people in different contexts.¹⁸ As such, the experiences of others who have employed an artifact “accumulate in the structural properties of the [artifact] as well as in the knowledge about how the [artifact] should be used.”¹⁹ From this follows that artifacts can be imbued with different symbolic meanings within specific cultures.²⁰

In second-generation AT, the unit of analysis is expanded from individual action to collective activity, and the social elements of community, rules, and division of labor are introduced to the activity system framework.²¹ The *community* is the group of individuals who share the object with the subject, constituting the socio-cultural context of the activity.²² Two other elements emanate from this socio-cultural context: the community’s shared rules and their division of labor. *Rules* can be formal, informal, or technical, and by influencing the subject’s actions in the collective activity, they constrain the activity system to a certain extent. The final social element of the activity system framework is the *division of labor* within the community, this division pertaining to the continually negotiated responsibilities, tasks, and power relations that inform collective activity.²³ As such, AT perceives activity (such as architectural practice) as a complex system of mediated interactions between subjects, communities, and the object of their activity.²⁴

Yrjö Engeström describes DWR as a multidisciplinary extension of AT that enables researchers and practitioners to perform empirical analyzes of activity that “lead to the threshold of the future” by uncovering the shortcomings of such activity.²⁵ Such analyzes constitute a unique learning space that forms a bridge between what is known and what needs to be learned.²⁶ This hypothetical learning space enables researchers to analyze activity and explore how the contradictions that arise as the activity unfolds over time are resolved. DWR is underpinned by three methodological ideas:

- The unit of analysis is a collective, object-oriented activity system, mediated by artifacts and by the community of stakeholders that assemble around the activity, as well as the rules and division of labor that pertain to the activity.
- The causes of disturbances, innovations, and change are understood as contradictions embedded within the activity system.
- Change and development are understood as collective learning processes that lead to the “local expansive construction of new artifacts and new models of shared practice.”²⁷

These ideas pertain to the activity system framework embedded in DWR, which is used to analyze the “mirror of everyday practice.”²⁸ As indicated in Fig. 40.2, the latter is provided by semi-structured case study interviews. In the course of interview analyzes, intermediate conceptual tools with the potential to lead to new models for practice are invented. In this research—by virtue of representing a broader mode of architectural practice—GAP is understood as such a conceptual tool.

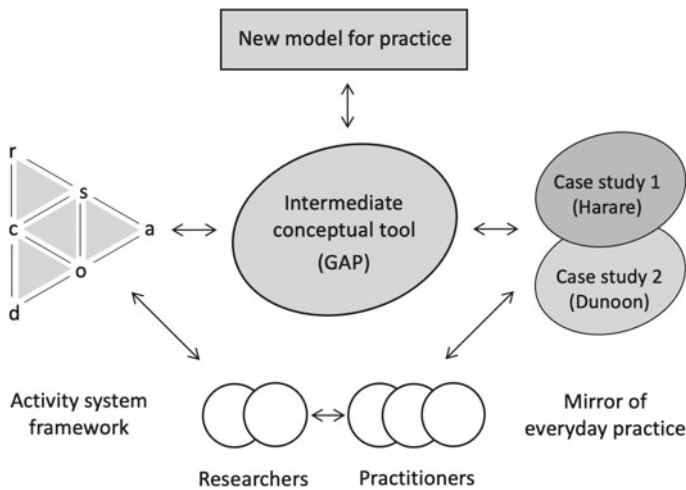


Fig. 40.2 DWR as employed in the research presented in this chapter. *Diagram* Rudolf Perold, adapted from Engeström, “Developmental Work Research: A Paradigm in Practice”

Case studies

I will discuss the two projects selected as case studies in order of completion, starting with the Harare Library, which was completed in 2011. Charlotte Chamberlain & Nicola Irving Architects (CCNIA) designed the Harare Library in collaboration with Tarna Klitzner Landscape Architects (TKLA) and violence prevention through urban upgrading (VPUU, a multidisciplinary community development organization). These three entities constitute the collective *subject* of the AT analysis, while the *object* is to make a library that meets the requirements of the client (the City of Cape Town, COCT), while also addressing the needs of the residents of Harare. Accordingly, the desired *outcome* of their activity is a building that contributes positively to the socio-spatial development of the settlement.

Prior to CCNIA being appointed to design the library, VPUU had spent three years engaging with the community, gaining their trust, and setting a process in motion to establish a network of safe streets and pedestrian links. The library was to be embedded into the settlement as a node along with one of these pedestrian links, and TKLA was appointed to assist with the landscape architecture aspects of the design, thereby establishing a thoroughly multidisciplinary project team. While challenged by the complexities in the brief presented by the COCT, particularly with regard to the low literacy level of residents and the question of how to make the library engaging to them, CCNIA benefited from the combined expertise of the project team.

The principal *artifact* employed in the activity is the standard architectural service, which is defined by the South African Institute of Architects (SAIA) in their client-architect agreement.²⁹ This service is expressed as a number of sequential work stages, each associated with a portion of the professional fee. The standard architectural service is also subject to the regulations of the South African Council for the Architectural Profession (SACAP). However, SAIA is a voluntary organization, SACAP is a statutory body, and all architects are bound to their code of professional conduct.³⁰ The standard architectural service and code of professional conduct have developed in the context of a formal, market-driven economy. They are based on the assumption that clients are able to engage with architects on equal terms. When employed in the context of an informal settlement, the standard architectural service—with its very specific structural properties and symbolic meaning—is simply inadequate.

The socio-cultural context of the activity is defined by the *community* assembled around the making of the library, who share this object with the project team. Harare is a neighborhood in Khayelitsha, an apartheid-era formal settlement that has experienced high levels of informal growth over the past twenty-five years. The settlement is poverty-stricken and notorious for its high crime rate, and VPUU's social development interventions aim to address both of these issues. Accordingly, the community dialog transformed the brief from a community library into a "House of Learning" that supports learning at various stages of a person's life. Beyond conventional services such as access to books and electronic media, the library also includes a computer center, a study hall, meeting rooms, and offices for community groups, as well as

an early childhood development center with facilities for nearby day care centers, which are encouraged to bring children into the bright and stimulating environment of the library.

A number of *rules* emanate from the composition of the community assembled around the activity. CCNIA took their cue from VPUU, who was the lead consultant and had very strict rules relating to communication channels. These rules gave transparency to the consultation process, providing CCNIA with access to knowledgeable partners while at the same time supporting them in navigating the complexity of the multi-stakeholder process. At the onset, there were many community forum meetings, which gave CCNIA an acute awareness of the socio-spatial complexity of the project. These meetings also brought to the fore the question of how to balance the interests of the various stakeholders, and indeed, who the real client was. The COCT wanted a secure, fortified, and enclosed building, while VPUU desired a building that formed an active edge to their pedestrian route so as to improve safety. At the same time, residents had a completely different set of needs that had to be addressed. The result is a large and complex building that blurs the boundary between inside and outside, with a double volume internal street shown in Fig. 40.3 acting as the "living room" of the neighborhood. The various components of the building are arranged around this space.

Community participation is central to VPUU's work, and as such, the *division of labor* included the involvement of residents in the design process through a number of special-interest forums. CCNIA insisted on all stakeholders being present at design



Fig. 40.3 Double volume internal street acts as the "living room" of the neighborhood. *Photo* Charlotte Chamberlain & Nicola Irving Architects

meetings so as to provide richness in the debate. In particular, the contributions of the library and information services department of the COCT were extremely valuable. CCNIA held fortnightly meetings with the COCT to report on progress, present deliverables, and obtain sign-offs. Simultaneously, they attended community and business forums on weekends and evenings—first to engage, dialog, and listen to community concerns, and then, to gradually start presenting their work. The use of models (such as the one shown in Fig. 40.4) rather than drawings allowed for a rapid synthesis of qualitative and quantitative aspects of the design with intense periods of work between meetings.

The Dunoon library was completed in 2019, eight years after the Harare library. In this case, the COCT is the *subject* of the AT analysis, as their urban sustainability unit (USU, at the time part of the urban design unit) was the principal consultant. In addition to this role, the project team liaised with engineers and project managers (who were appointed by tender) as well as the libraries and information services department, who were the user-client. The *object* was to make a library that met the requirements of the user-client while also addressing the needs of the residents of Dunoon. As with the case of the Harare library, the desired *outcome* of the activity was to make a building that contributed positively to the socio-spatial development of the settlement, and the principal *artifact* was the standard architectural service as defined by SAIA.

The COCT purchased the Dunoon farm twenty-five years ago and established a new settlement to accommodate residents relocated from the Marconi Beam informal

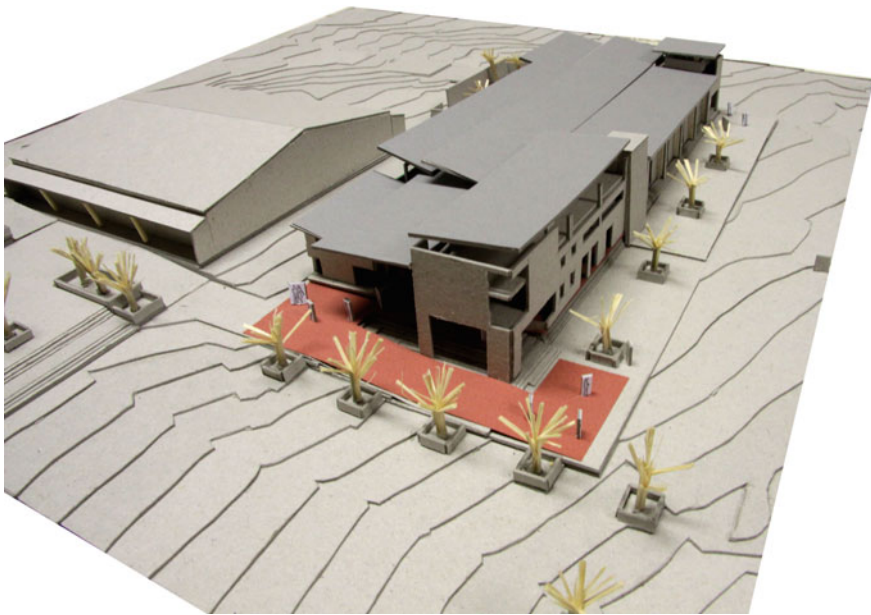


Fig. 40.4 Model of the building. *Photo CCNIA*

settlement in the suburb of Milnerton. Dunoon experienced extremely rapid informal growth—its population increasing five-fold during the past two decades—as a result of its prime location relative to employment opportunities as well as strong transport networks to the CBD. Informed by extensive research conducted by ARG Design (a multidisciplinary architecture, urban design, and town/city planning practice), the COCT planned a learning and innovation precinct adjacent to the only secondary school in Dunoon that would include a sports club, a library, and an early childhood development center.

The *community* that assembled around the making of the library included stakeholders from nearby schools and daycare centers. Their respective needs informed the order and priority of the three projects. In the design of the library, different facilities were grouped together so as to enable resource sharing with the building including a computer center, a study hall, meeting rooms, and a daycare facility that would be supported by the early childhood development center. The library accommodates children of various ages with spaces for storytelling sessions and youth programs. The project team recognized the importance of providing high-quality learning resources and the need for safe and attractive social spaces, including music listening pods and free Wi-Fi access in the building. A double-skin facade with curtain wall glazing allows for natural ventilation and views into the building and includes accessible balconies and a green wall. As seen in Fig. 40.5, the use of such advanced, high-quality construction elements in a public building is unprecedented in the settlement, and in a recent poll of residents, it was reported that the most meaningful change in Dunoon during the past five years was the construction of the library.³¹



Fig. 40.5 Advanced, high-quality construction of the library is unique in its setting. *Photo* City of Cape Town Urban Sustainability Unit

The informal rule hastened the construction of the library. Since vacant public land had to be protected from invasion, the best solution to secure land was to insert functions that addressed the needs of the community. Notwithstanding this, the project team found it difficult to be quick and adaptable in their implementation, as it deviated from the urban planning framework for the settlement. The imperative of adapting to the immediate context also influenced the design of the library, and the project team redefined their norms of what a public building in an informal settlement should be. For example, to satisfy regulations related to parking, the building was elevated to create a covered open space that allows for parking, but is mostly used for external functions such as community events and children's play spaces, as shown in Fig. 40.6. An entrance foyer and vertical circulation are placed at one end of this covered space, allowing for shared use by a future extension. Likewise, the roof of the library is accessible to residents as a viewing platform over the settlement, and has a saw-tooth steel pergola that can be enclosed to form additional internal space when the need arises.

To a large extent, the formal community participation process employed by the COCT defined the *division of labor* of the activity. During this process, the project team built on existing relationships with various community stakeholder groups and their representatives—their real clients in the community—and had to balance their needs with that of the COCT and the user–client, the libraries and information services department. In some instances, multiple meetings were held to resolve issues where the regulations that the COCT had to abide by and the needs of community stakeholder groups were at odds.

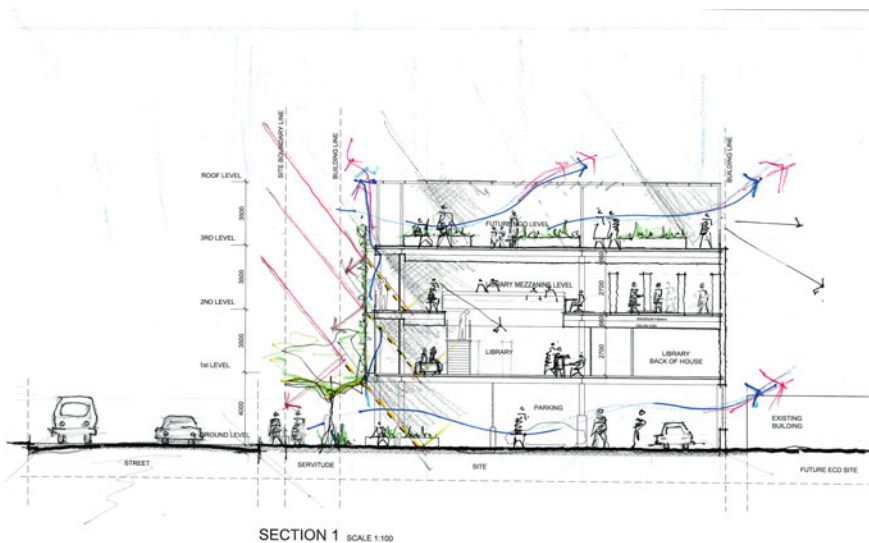


Fig. 40.6 Building is raised above the ground to create a covered, multifunctional space. *Drawing* COCT USU

Discussion

Soon after the completion of the Dunoon Library, the learning and innovation precinct was awarded the international Human City Design Award 2019 to recognize its contribution to building a more harmonious and sustainable relationship between residents and their environment, tackling urban environmental issues, and presenting a new vision through creative design.³² As was the case with the Harare Library, the Dunoon Library is described as being a “living room” for the neighborhood that provides both a shared workspace and an extension of residents’ homes. Accordingly, it stands to reason that community engagement ought to be a fundamental part of architectural practice in this context.

The analysis of the two case studies has made it evident that the standard architectural service—as an artifact employed by architects to engage in the collaborative making of buildings in informal settlements—is inadequate to engage with the socio-spatial complexity of such an endeavor. Expressed in terms of the activity system, where the relationship between the subject (architect) and object (to make a contextually-appropriate building collaboratively) is mediated by the artifact, it is clear that the standard architectural service must evolve to allow for extensive community engagement at all stages of the project. As more architects engage with the collaborative making of buildings in informal settlements, their experiences will “accumulate in the structural properties of the [artifact] as well as in the knowledge of how the [artifact] should be used.”³³ In so doing, a broader mode of architectural practice that includes community engagement will also allow for adequate attention to the socio-cultural context of the activity: the community, rules, and division of labor.

It is insightful to reflect on how community engagement was accommodated in the case study projects. In the Harare Library case study, CCNIA had an agreement with VPUU, who in turn had an agreement with the COCT to facilitate the community engagement process. However, it has been shown that architects have to be a central part of this process, and in order to sustain such a broader mode of practice, community engagement must be integrated into the standard architectural service so that architects can be remunerated for the substantial additional work involved. CCNIA now includes the framing of the project and a planning exercise as a standard part of the architectural service they offer to their clients. In the Dunoon Library case study, the formal community participation process of the COCT provided the project team with guidelines for community engagement and supplemented the standard architectural service.

Notwithstanding this, it is an onerous task to sieve out, unpack, and digest the needs of a diverse client body. Furthermore, it is challenging for architects, who are accustomed to being the principal consultant in more conventional projects, to share power with professionals from other disciplines and even with community representatives. Such engagement requires “a strong sixth sense and the ability to read between the lines,”³⁴ as well as the ability to “put aside your ego and to develop the lexicon to engage in an unfamiliar context.”³⁵ Another aspect of the standard

architectural service that needs to evolve is the final stage, referred to as the “close-out” of the project. Handing over a complex building to a diverse user group in an informal settlement requires much more attention, care, and time than the standard architectural service allows, where a customized “user manual” is simply provided to the client.

Conclusion

This research focuses on the rebuilding of architectural practice through community engagement rather than imposing normative architectural practice onto the informal city. Normative architectural practice finds it challenging to engage with the socio-spatial complexity inherent to the collaborative making of buildings in informal settlements. The previous research suggests that it is the structure of the standard architectural service more than the professional competencies that architects possess, that makes such engagement challenging.³⁶ In the preceding discussion, I have made suggestions with regards to how community engagement can be integrated into the standard architectural service. Engaging with residents of informal settlement presents architects with the opportunity to invent new roles for themselves as they navigate the socio-spatial complexity inherent in the collaborative making of buildings. These new roles will enable architects to find relevance in the informal city, to work in multidisciplinary teams and engage with residents in appropriate ways, and in doing so, to rebuild the profession from within.

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