

URBAN DESIGN STUDIO PEDAGOGY: THINKING ABOUT INFORMALITY

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Abstract. In the past, urban design teaching and practice have focused on the design of urban spaces as being the modulation of the physical aspects of the fabric while the complex social processes that contribute to its making have not been included. More recently, a few practitioners and educationists have voiced concern about this and suggested instead an alternative path where the design effort is based on field-intensive mapping exercises to understand the ground reality. With this background, the broader objective of this paper is to understand how an urban design studio can contribute to a pedagogy for a people-centric approach to urban design and planning.

Specifically, the paper draws upon lessons learned from a studio that focused on an informal marketplace in the city of Ahmedabad, India. It finds that understanding the everyday life of an urban space can reveal underlying patterns and systems that urban designers can incorporate into the planning of public spaces. The key contribution of this paper is to provide empirical evidence for these patterns and systems generated through studio exercises in order to show how they can contribute to a design language for developing sustainable urban spaces.

Keywords: *Informality, everyday life, temporality, urban design, pedagogy.*

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1. Introduction

In the past, urban design education and practice has looked at the design of urban spaces as an exercise involving a geometric arrangement of unbuilt spaces where the edges of the urban form determined the space which was seen to have physical parameters but no social parameters. More recently, a few practitioners and educationists have voiced concern about this and suggested instead an alternative path where the design effort could use a people-oriented approach. Loukaitou-Sideris & Mukhija (2016) propose that students should spend time at the sites of investigation to observe and understand the ongoing social and economic activities and interact with users in order to develop a design strategy that has both aesthetic and functional attributes and relates to the everyday life of people.

It has been found that urban design education has often not employed a critical mindset that can question given urban conditions nor shown the awareness that urban space is also politically and economically intense (Akpinar et al, 2016). It has been suggested that as design educators, we need to step back from proposing global strategies and instead construct a model that also includes the cultural identity of a place (Crysler, 1995). The pedagogical approach has conventionally not attempted to inform design interventions with ethnographic investigations into how urban spaces are actually used (Kim, 2015). Further, it has been pointed out that there are not enough

seminars and workshop activities that can bring together students, practicing professionals, government officials, local experts and faculty (Palazzo, 2011).

There have been alternative approaches to urban design pedagogy that have included an integration of the physical and nonphysical attributes of place (Arefi & Triantafillou, 2005); a collaborative process between studio instructors and community groups that have helped build and sustain community-university partnerships (Hou, 2014); the multiple poles model where urban design teaching draws upon the disciplines of architecture, planning, engineering, landscape or real estate (Carmona, 2016); investigating sites and promoting discussions to reveal how urban projects and policies can be designed for resilience (Akpinar *et al.*, 2016) or engaging with the politics, issues and human needs of a complex, urban site through a studio+seminar format (Bendiner-Viani & Maltby, 2010). Furthermore, Cidre (2016) has pointed out that the emergent pedagogy in urban design may be a design-based reflective learning generated from the collaborative effort of students, educators, practitioners, communities and policy makers.

It may be necessary to take into account that the informality is a part of the urban fabric and our design processes both in the studio and in practice need to respond to it. In the context of cities of the global south, we may not be able to work anymore on the assumption that informality in urban space does not exist, that it can be ignored or that it is possible for us to achieve ‘zero informality’ (Keswani, 2018). This paper attempts to show how an urban design studio that engaged in extensive fieldwork in an informal marketplace in Ahmedabad, India reveals patterns and systems that are an integral part of an urban space, particularly in emerging economies (Fig.1).



Figure 1. The informal street market at Jamalpur, Ahmedabad – the primary site of investigation

It further suggests that these patterns that reflect the ground reality can contribute to urban design strategies that can make urban spaces into more humane and sustainable environments.

Alexander (1979) has pointed out that for a temporal ordering of an urban space, it is necessary that it be adaptive to human needs. In that sense, the marketplace environment was found to be a highly, adaptive spatial environment that could mould itself according to societal and economic changes. Additionally, it was also a public space that tied in with major lines of movement having established itself over time at the crossroads of both pedestrian and vehicular traffic networks of the city. Here, it may be also possible to discern one of the principles outlined in the *Oregon experiment*, the principle of organic order which is believed to emerge when there is perfect balance between the needs of the individual parts of an environment and the needs of the whole (Alexander, 1975). The paper attempts to extract the tacit, culture-defined and informal responses to the multiple factors that govern the space to eventually work towards such an organic order.

In the informal marketplace, the study finds evidence of a ‘living geometry’ that is loose, complex and interconnective (Salingaros *et al.*, 2006:12). It maps the spatial configurations that result from the temporal usage of the street space by the informal vendors. The patterns of interaction between the stakeholders are documented through both visual and interview data. There is a conscious attempt to generate maps as representations of the social process. Through these maps, the studio has tried to decipher and document some of the rules of the organized complexity that is a part of urban informality and an intrinsic part of the marketplace in the Indian context.

Urban planning scholars have suggested that informal urbanism can be a catalyst for urban theorising if we work across categories and disciplines (Acuto *et al.*, 2019). For the purpose of the studio and this paper, informality has been defined as the use of urban space for purposes it was not officially designated for – such as a sidewalk space for vending rather than walking or road space for walking rather than for the movement of cars. The studio used the understanding of informal markets as structures and systems of people i.e. spatial organization, unspoken rules, territories and temporalities. Scholars suggest that it may be useful to work towards a collaborative approach to urban design (Salingaros, 2018). This paper attempts to develop one possible way to do this through understanding users’ everyday negotiations with the existing conditions of an urban space.

2. Structure of the studio

It has been emphasized that the structure of knowledge needed for the education of an urban designer must have both theoretical and empirical components (Lukovich, 2017). In moving towards the goal of responding to informality, the studio adopted the spatial ethnographic approach of *mapping the everyday* as a starting point. It was supported by a theory cum fieldwork course where the attempt was to learn:

- (1) how to ‘read’ the everyday, and
- (2) how to ‘represent’ the everyday through sketches and maps.

This course consisted of lecture-presentations that drew upon on-going research by the Studio faculty on understanding the ‘informal’ and the ‘everyday’ in urban spaces.

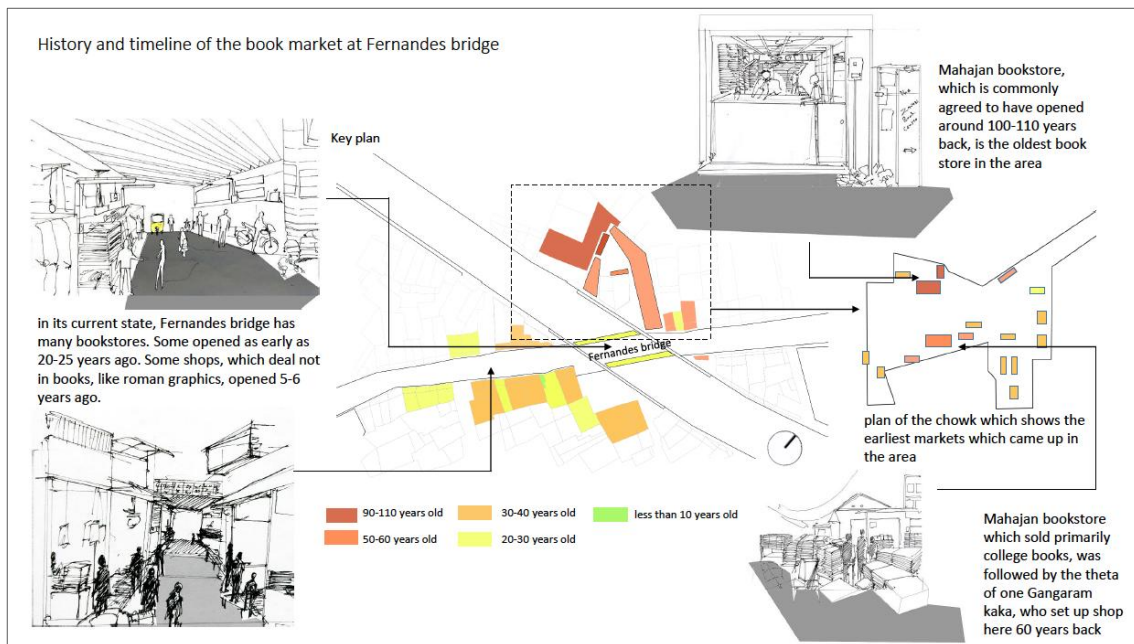


Figure 2. Exploratory site - Secondhand books market under the Fernandes bridge
(Students: Aryan Iyer & Meet Kakadia)

One finds that there has been an increase in design-build studios today that are research-driven, that emphasise the values cultivated via community engagement and service (Hinson, 2007). Salama (2012) has emphasised the need for experiential learning where participants may be in close contact with the environment, exploring culture, diversity and people behaviour. Further, there have been research studios that have explored the city, setting out to see the ordinary in a new way and to learn from it (Varnelis, 2007). In this paper, the focus is on understanding the research studio and how it can contribute to the urban design field.

The ‘Informal marketplace’ studio had two parts to it. In the first part (4 weeks), the students looked at ‘Exploratory sites’ (Fig.2) that included:

1. The making/selling of *Ganesha* idols¹ at Hollywood basti, Gulbai Tekra
2. The secondhand books market under the Fernandes bridge, Gandhi road
3. The street bazaar from Teen darwaja to Pankornaka

Throughout the semester, the students had journals which included field notes from the two parts of the studio. The journal entry included here shows a student’s understanding of the temporal changes within the flower vending space of the Jamalpur market (Fig.3).

In the second part (12 weeks), the studio looked at the informal conditions outside and along the Jamalpur APMC market². In particular, the students focused on:

¹ These clay idols are hand-made by local artisans for the annual 10-day *Ganesha* festival that celebrates the birth of Lord Ganesha as the God of new beginnings and the remover of obstacles.

² This is the wholesale fruit and vegetable market of the Agricultural Produce Marketing Committee (APMC) which is a marketing board established by the State governments in India.

- Understanding the *informal* and the *everyday* in the marketplace (ANALYSIS) in the context of Jamalpur.
- Developing Urban design strategies and guidelines in response to informality (DESIGN)

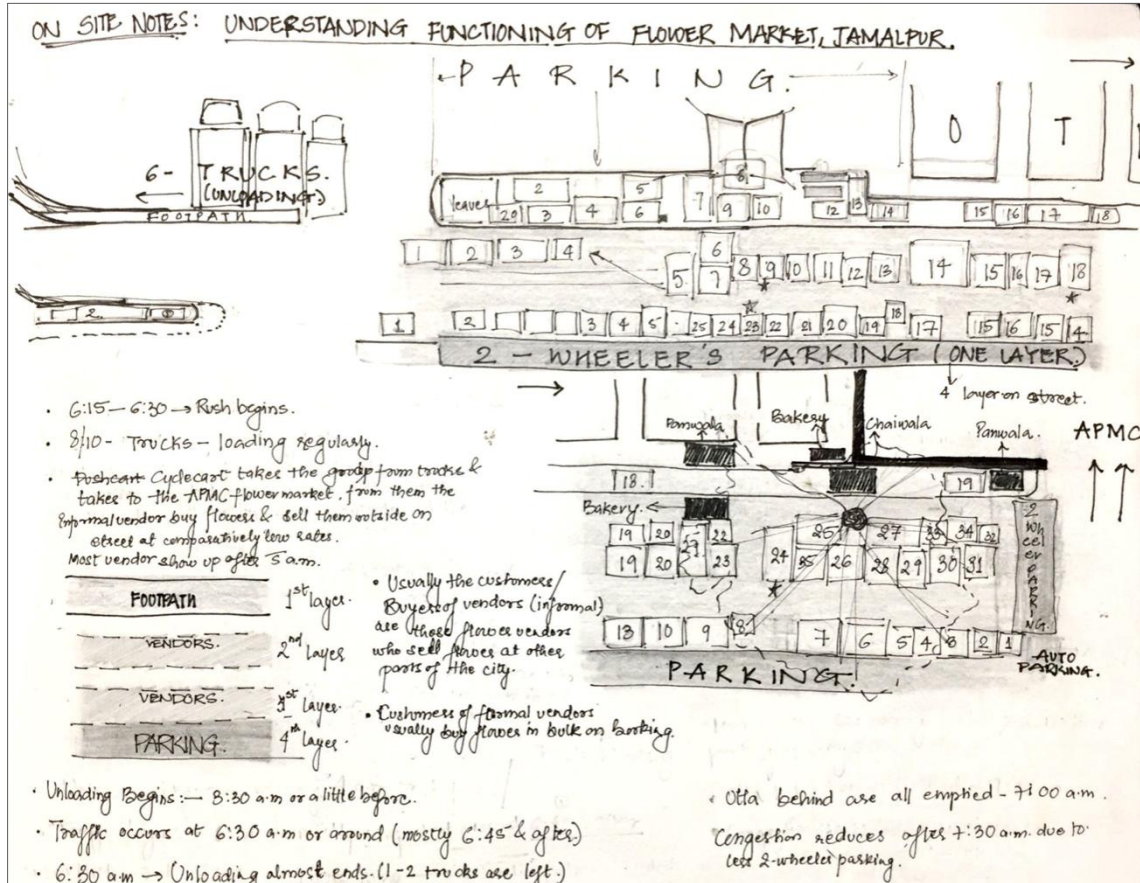


Figure 3. Journal entry from *Mapping the Everyday* course (Student: Shubhangi Saxena)

In the ANALYSIS component, an in-depth study of the informal vending activities was carried out using the concept of territoriality where the students looked at how boundaries were negotiated both spatially and socially and what measures were adopted to resolve conflicts between the different stakeholders (Fig.4). In the DESIGN component, the attempt was to draw upon the concepts of temporality and resilience. This led to the preparation of urban design plans that showed temporal usage of the space through the day. These temporal plans suggested that the space is designed so as to be used in multiple ways at different times and is therefore resilient in nature thereby reducing congestion as well as contestations in space.

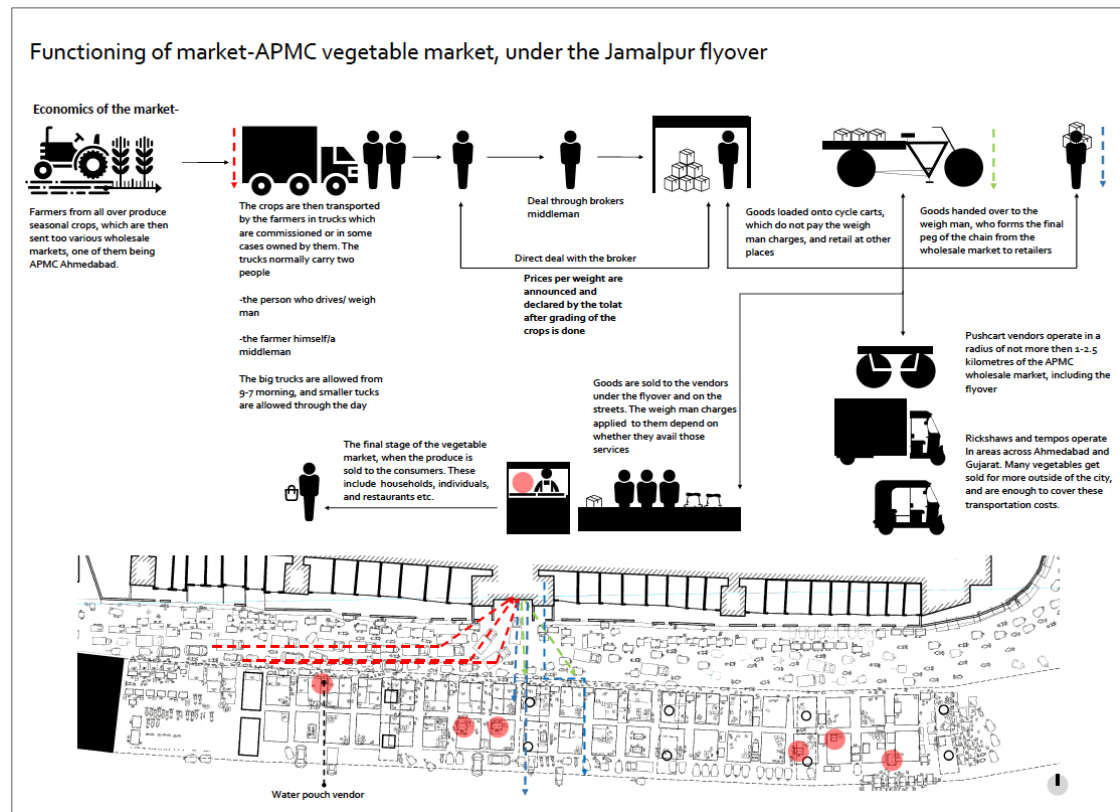


Figure 4. The functionality of the urban space (Students: Shourya Dubey, Aryan Iyer & Atal Chadha)

3. Design approach for informality

It has been largely pointed out by urban design scholars and practitioners that dealing with informality falls within the regulatory and policy realms and there is no important role that urban design can play. However, Loukaitou-Sideris & Mukhija (2016) suggest that it is possible for design to respond to spatial informality. As a first step, they suggest that the concept of 'informality' be included in the vocabulary of urban designers and that the field expand its scope to include the ordinary spaces of everyday life. Further, they suggest that a supportive public infrastructure be considered to accommodate informality; that underutilized spaces in the city be identified for hosting informal activities; that creative effort be made to blur boundaries between the formal and the informal and finally, that temporal thinking be used as a design strategy.

The studio that this paper derives from was similarly based on the assumption that it is possible for urban designers to address and respond to the needs and circumstances of the multiple actors of informality if an alternative design approach could be developed.

Towards this end, the studio attempted a 3-pronged approach for developing design strategies:

- *Designing a system* through understanding garbage disposal and collection and its place in the social and physical environment of the marketplace.
- Influencing *the functionality of the urban space* through physical and systemic changes (Fig.5).
- Modulating *the spatial experience* through a design intervention.

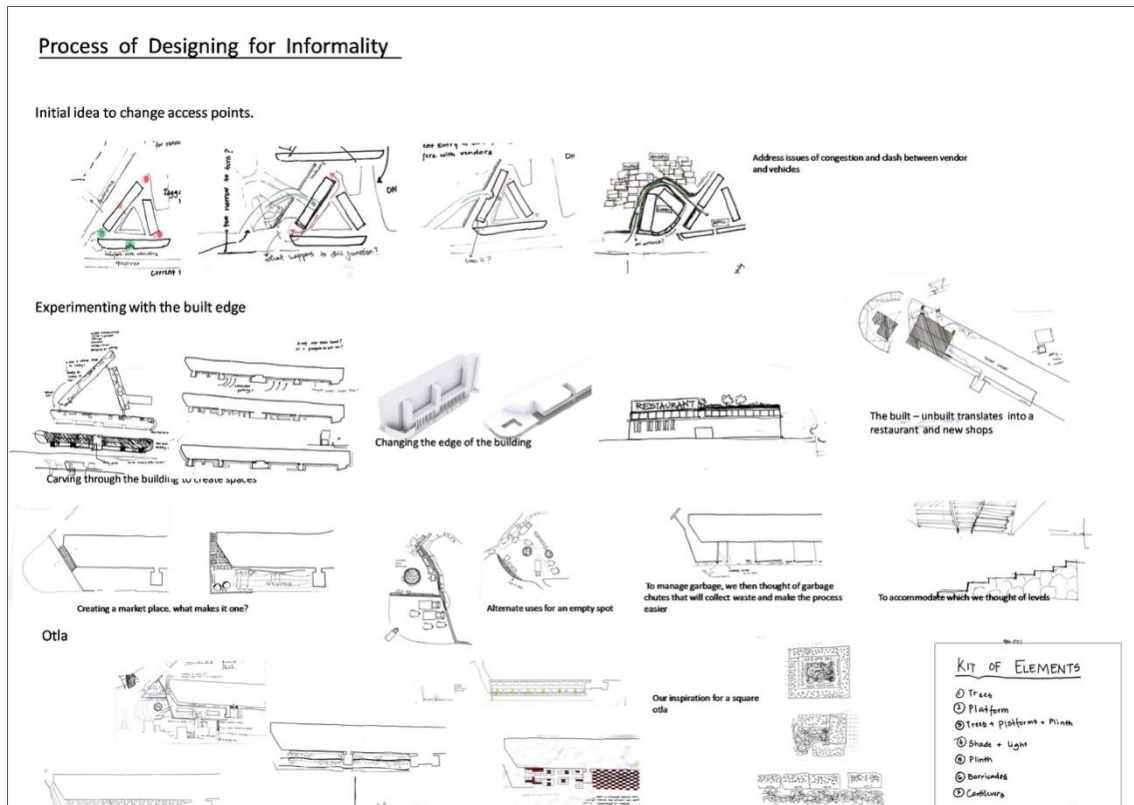


Figure 5. The design process for a better 'spatial experience' (Students: Hetvee Panchal, Harsh Gupta & Dharankumar Korduvar)

In *designing a system*, all groups were asked to focus on the system of garbage – the existing conditions and the proposed structure. It was necessary to understand the 'systems' in the marketplace – how things worked. For instance, how a light supplier who came in the morning, while the streets were still dark, to give battery-operated lights to the flower vendors worked – where he stopped along the length of the market, at what time he arrived, how the operations of renting out the lights worked, where was the auto-rickshaw or 3-wheeler vehicle with the battery pack parked during the time that the lights were used, etc. Or, for example, how the vendor or service provider selling water pouches to the vegetable vendors operated – where did he stand, was he a moving vendor on a bicycle and so on.

Through understanding 'garbage as a system', the studio exercises were meant to show linkages between livelihood networks and spatial networks. For example, to understand the interdependencies between the private contractor who picked up the garbage from the collection points and the multiple vendor groups or between the garbage picker and the market inspector. There were modes of operation here that had developed organically and stabilized over time to become 'systems'. In the studio, it was important to study the sequence of operations that made up the system so that in part or whole, they could be eliminated or strengthened. The early fieldwork had revealed that while on the outside the marketplace could be made functionally and physically more efficient, on the inside, it needed to work without the disruption of the multitude of systems and the livelihoods that supported them.

The *functionality of the urban space* outputs were based on extensive visual observations and an interviewing process. There were classroom discussions on which parts of the street or marketplace could be perceived as spaces for ‘transition’ or for ‘pause’? The students explored if there was a need to create pause points in the Jamalpur market. Or, instead, was there a need to subtract some pauses or activity generators in order to reduce the traffic congestion? Could the morning flower auction be considered a place-making phenomena that had resulted organically? How could one learn from this to create a ‘pause’ elsewhere as part of the design intervention?

While the first two components of the studio focused on systems and functionality, the third component attempted to focus on design interventions using built form, the built edge and through modulating *the spatial experience* (Fig.6). The students were asked to explore how the final design solution could reflect not just the physical elements of the urban space but in a way that could incorporate the social dynamics between the users.

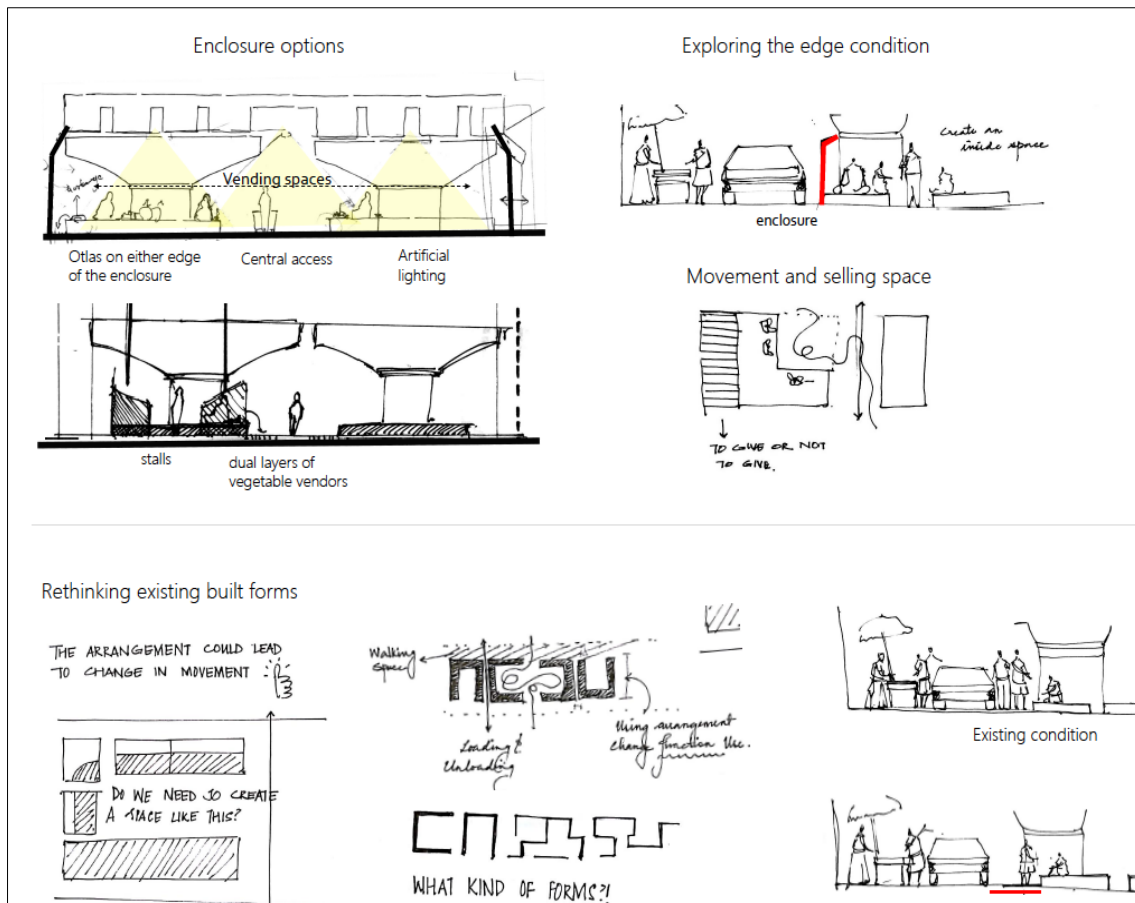


Figure 6. Modulating the spatial experience through a design intervention (Students: Shourya Dubey, Aryan Iyer & Atal Chadha)

It was required that the plan reflect the *temporality* in the marketplace. This meant having a series of plans for different times of the day or year and not just one plan as the design output. In the Indian context, *shade* was seen as an essential urban design element. Each design intervention was to be based on an understanding from the site about how users were relying on shade, how much of it they used, at what times of the

day and ways in which it was generated – through trees, umbrellas or the shadows of nearby buildings.

While the design strategies were specific to each zone within the site, each group also proposed *urban design guidelines* that were more generic in nature and could be applied to marketplaces elsewhere in the city. The key learning outcome of the studio was that the process of designing for informality needed to be different from the conventional methods and could only emerge from a deeper understanding of ground reality.

4. Discussion

The interim and final output from the studio confirmed our underlying assumption that the pedagogical approach for urban design needs to be reviewed if we are to create inclusive cities. Glasser (2000) suggests that in order to prevent a mindless, unplanned growth of cities and the destruction of communities, the focus and agenda of architecture programs needs to be reassessed and emphasises the need for a studio environment that works towards educating thoughtful and socially responsible practitioners. All throughout history, we have had the creation of cities that depend upon services and food growth in the countryside. The city however because of its high density acquires new complex characteristics. It works well according to a special set of rules of urbanity which can be understood by studying successful cities (Salingaros, 2017).

5. Conclusion

The studio was based on the premise that people often use street space for purposes that they are not designated for, thereby generating informality. However, informality in urban space can also occur as a result of the preconceived or misconceived understanding of planners and administrators on how street space is being used. In that sense, the urban design pedagogy suggested in this paper supports urban design guidelines that could reduce informality that occurs from such a misconception.

Overall, this paper makes four key contributions. First, it emphasises the need for urban design studios to ‘read’ the everyday and to ‘represent’ it through maps. Second, it suggests that studios undertake intensive fieldwork that combines participant observation and detailed interviews with multiple stakeholders to understand the organized complexity of the urban space. Third, it points out that an urban design studio responding to informality offers the possibility to explore territoriality and temporality, which are both useful concepts to develop urban spaces as adaptive systems. Finally, it proposes that urban designers expand their scope of work to include creative responses to ‘designing a system’ i.e. the modes of operation of different stakeholder groups in the given space.

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