

Chapter 14

The Landscape Inequalities: How Inequalities and Social Injustices Can Be Affected and/or Orient the Development of Urban Landscape



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14.1 Introduction

Inequality is a term that refers to the difference in size, degree, and circumstance. It has been prevalent in society since the beginning of civilization, a state-of-being where some benefit and others do not. How do we solve inequality? To pose this question can be unintentionally reductive. The truth is that there is no single state of inequality, therefore there is no single act of solution. It is a component of reality, connected to every system of society. In the quest to promote equality, one must promote access. Inaccessibility is the prime factor in the disparaging growth of inequality in all realms – from wealth and income gaps to the social, racial and gender injustice to environmental inconsistencies. It is proposed that the architect, the designer of the built environment, has the tools and sensitivity to lessen these inequalities through strategic design intervention that will ultimately restructure space in such a way that promotes equality through accessibility in this landscape.

This work will serve as a synthesis of information found in *The Landscape of Inequality* by Christian Wade. It ultimately leads to a design proposal that responds to the many inequalities found, but not limited to the region of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. The material found here is an exploration of inequality via historical, cultural, economic, environmental, and diversities that have directly influenced and affected the built environment. The aim is to develop these ideas to inform and challenge the designer and their role in combating this obstacle: the unequal distribution of access as it pertains to income, wealth, politics, gender, race, and health.

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14.2 The Imbalanced Landscape

The imbalanced landscape refers to the inequality of political, social and economic distributions within society.

14.2.1 *Global Inequalities Throughout History*

The current societal imbalances stem from political hierarchies and their arrangement of social classification in conjunction with the economic benefits that can be made from this organizational system. It is imperative that the origin of these hierarchies and their presence in some of the first civilizations known to man are understood due to their complex history. Global inequalities in a historical context will reveal the origin of political hierarchy and how it directly influenced the social class systems within society as well as the economic consequences of these classifications throughout time.

14.2.2 *The Origin of Social Hierarchies and How They Create Unequal Societies*

Mesopotamia (from the Greek, meaning ‘between two rivers’), refers to the region of southwest Asia in the Tigris and Euphrates river system. It is known as one of the beginnings of human civilization and contributed innovations in several fields including the concept of time, mathematics, sailing, maps, writing, and agriculture. As time passed, Mesopotamia changed drastically in terms of culture as the region was taken over, time and time again by other rulers.

Social hierarchy has been an organizational tool of the most powerful civilizations throughout history. Mesopotamia had a variety of cities within their civilization, like Uruk, which had a population of approximately 50,000 people around 2300 BCE. Each of these cities had a clear and distinct level of separation in terms of social class which was organized as follows: the king and nobility, the priests and the priestesses, the upper class, the lower class, and the slaves. Naturally, a society with a system such as the one Mesopotamia created for themselves is rooted in inequality. This means that the king, nobles, and priests held the wealth, power and influence whereas the upper class tend to have some wealth in terms of resources (mainly rich agricultural land) and the lower class having less access to these resources (usually due to their geographical location being too far from the water or too small for large amounts of farming). The slaves in this society have no power.

What this classification system conveys is that urbanization of large populations tends to be a catalyst for social and wealth inequality. This is because as populations increase resources must be divided and distributed. When these resources are not

distributed evenly, due to greed and concern for the upkeep of social hierarchy and power, is when social inequality becomes more apparent.

14.3 The Current Unequal Society

Present day inequalities refer to the disparities of distribution within realms of society. As with the ancient world, political decisions have a direct correlation with the social and economic implications on individuals within a civilization.

14.3.1 Political Inequality: Movement of Political Power and Its Impact on Distribution

Politics refers to the activities surrounding the governance of a country or area. Political inequality is when a certain group of persons or individuals have a greater influence over political decision-making and gain benefit from the outcome of those decisions despite proper political procedures set in place according to democratic regulations. So, political inequality derives directly from the abuse of power in the political realm for gain or profit. Politics can be used to reorganize the distribution of services in order to aid those who are disproportionately affected by the lack of access to such resources.

Political inequality tends to be the catalyst for many other forms of social and economic inequalities, including education, gender, income, health, racial, etc. This is since politics are used to shape the way a country or region operates, when those placed in power make decisions that are not inclusive to all parties it affects, inequality is formed.

14.3.2 Economic Booms and Turmoil and How They Influence Inequality Amongst Inhabitants

Sociologists have theorized about the presence of inequality in the modern context for several years. There has been a noticeable jump in the disparities between the social classes of the modern world, technological innovation has been characterized as a main reason for these inequality levels. The advancements in technology since the 1990s make the skilled worker a redundant part of civilization. This caused the global financial crisis in 2008. “bottom line: economic disparities increased over the centuries and technology played a role” (Shaer, 2018). With the middle-class worker out of commission, the gap between the rich, middle class, and poor widens, as the

middle class grows significantly larger and poorer while the rich grow richer yet smaller in quantity.

The discrepancy in this narrative is that there have been inequalities in society since the first civilizations, such as Mesopotamia, rose to fruition. The basis is that political power creates inequality because politics, or those who are politically in charge, are in the position to create their governances as equal, or unequal as they see fit. The issue is that those who are in power have been in power for decades and have no interest in changing the scales in any realm, whether it be social, political, or economic. “the richest 10% of adults in the world own 85% of global household wealth; the bottom half collectively owns barely 1%” (Davies et al., 2006).

14.3.3 Social Inequalities in History and Their Interconnectivity in the World

Social inequality speaks to the unequal opportunities and rewards for those who belong to different social groups or positions within a society. Examples of these inequalities can be gender, race, health, and wealth. The major areas and examples of social inequality include the access to voting rights, property rights, educational access, health care, quality housing, the right to assemble, transportation, and freedom of speech, among other things. For example, out of 187 countries that were studied by the world bank, only six of them have given women equal working rights as men. These are the facts that speak to these issues at the global scale. “At the current rate of progress, it will take another 108 years to reach gender parity” (Schwab, 2018).

14.4 Localized Unequal Space. Detroit, Michigan, USA

Detroit is a brilliant but greatly affected city suffering from levels of economic disparity and social inequality. Detroit is home to some of the most affluent members of American society, many of them being professional athletes or businessmen and women. Historically, Detroit was made into one of America’s central hubs for transit of goods and services, alongside New York and Chicago. Detroit took another route with the automotive industry as well. The city was the home of General Motors, Chrysler, and Ford. This made Detroit a hotspot for the middle class American, as the amount of available work was high, and the suburban surrounding neighborhoods made it easier to raise a family.

By the 1950s Detroit had simultaneously hit its peak and its downfall. The American automotive industry hit a stand still because of the influx of foreign cars, made mostly in Japan, because they were more fuel efficient. Subsequently, all the American automobile factories shutdown and ran out of business. Racial tensions

were also growing, many Black Americans moved to Detroit around this time, which caused a lot of the white communities to move out. The infamous Twelfth Street Riot went on for 5 days. Black Americans fought against the police in the streets as a result of police brutality due to high racial tensions. From this moment forward, the city was unable to regain its momentum from former days. By 2013, Detroit was forced to file bankruptcy which happened to be the largest filing of an American city to this day.

In terms of space, the rezoning of large portions of Detroit and the outer suburbs in the present day plays a large part in the rise of social inequalities through political control. As a result of this redlining, the historical districts which serve predominantly black communities are impoverished. In many cases, these communities will remain impoverished. However, there are circumstances where wealthier developers are interested in these areas. Once this happens, there are a couple outcomes that begin to present themselves. One is people are forced to move in order to find higher quality of life elsewhere. These homes are then bought, repaired and sold to richer or more sought-after families. In other cases, poor families who do not own their homes cannot remain on track with their payments which leads to foreclosure. In downtown Detroit, the vacancies are being re-purposed for big businesses to move in. This seems like a positive reuse of these left-over spaces; however, the surrounding local businesses cannot keep up with the rising property taxes due to this gentrification.

14.5 Balancing the Landscape

There are several groups working toward creating more equal opportunity for desperate communities, at both macro and micro scales. While think tanks and economists work on equality through policy, the architect works in the realm of space. Architectural interventions at the local scale work in a way that bridges the gap between the unequal spaces in which it resides. This is to create better living, working, transitional spaces in the present day until the governmental policies change.

14.5.1 *Global Financial Integrity: Illicit Flows*

Global or international inequality refers to the major differences present when comparing countries to one another – typically based on their individual economies as well as medical and education systems. Global Financial Integrity is a think tank based in Washington DC, USA. They focus primarily on illicit flows globally and how the “unseen” currency moves illegally through the globe and the effects that these movements have on countries’ inequality levels. One of the major solutions that GFI proposes targets illicit flow activity directly. “Trade mis-invoicing has impacted emerging markets and developing countries for decades by siphoning

capital out of economies and denying governments vitally important domestic resources” (Illicit Financial Flows, 2020). This form of illicit flows can be manifested through, over, or under invoicing through imports and exports. This results in a loss of billions of dollars’ worth of revenue annually for several developing or developed countries. For solutions, Global Trade Integrity has created a series of steps including but not limited to an economic analysis, policy overview and a risk management assessment.

14.5.2 Quinta Monroy/ELEMENTAL

The Quinta Monroy project is a housing project located in Chile. The site was illegally occupied by several residents for over 30 years. Architect Alejandro Aravena of ELEMENTAL intervened with a social housing project that attempts to make use of the land for social and economic benefit of the people while also housing as many families as possible in the most comfortable way. “In the end, when the given money is enough for just half of the house, the key question is, which half do we do. We choose to make the half that a family individually will never be able to achieve on its own, no matter how much money, energy or time they spend. That is how we expect to contribute using architectural tools, to non-architectural questions, in this case, how to overcome poverty” (Fracalossi, 2008). By creating housing that has the ability to expand, the families are able to invest in their community directly. The project is 50% self-built, using local, cheap, but proper materials. “We think that social housing should be seen as an investment and not as an expense. So, we had to make sure that the initial subsidy can add value over time” (Fracalossi, 2008).

14.6 The Proposal

This design proposal finds itself in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Rio de Janeiro is recognized as one of the world’s most beautiful and interesting urban centers. The site analysis is made of a variety of scales, each introducing a new understanding of some of the dynamics of the region from the Global scale (Fig. 14.1), to the South American, Brazilian, Rio Metropolitan, and the Rio Urban scale. The Landscape of Vulnerability is a strategic plan analysis of some of the most vulnerable sites in Rio de Janeiro, one of the most volatile being Rocinha which became a major point of intervention in the strategic plan.



Fig. 14.1 The Global Landscape: an overall global analysis of social, cultural, technological, environmental, economic, and “dark” or illegal entities that are specifically compared to Brazil in order to determine the effects and phenomena

14.6.1 Rocinha

The strategic intervention for Rocinha (Fig. 14.2) focuses on the threshold between the built and the unbuilt space and how this threshold can be permeated in different ways. The threshold is placed on the very edge of the favela, separating the forest from the existing housing. There are openings to enter the forest along this threshold (Fig. 14.3), as well as community buildings, new housing, urban farming, markets, and other productive spaces. The flood canal behind all these new spaces is made to divert the flood water from the buildings and filter it through the new wells that can be used to aid water collection and flood management. It is not possible to stop Rocinha from growing at the rate it does, but the way it grows can be controlled. Instead of growing in a way that destroys the environment that the residents depend on, they can create and organize themselves further through cohesive building materials, open market and gathering spaces, community, health and education spaces, as well as water collection and flood prevention. In this way, the aim is to allow Rocinha to remain as an independent network within the framework known as Rio de Janeiro.

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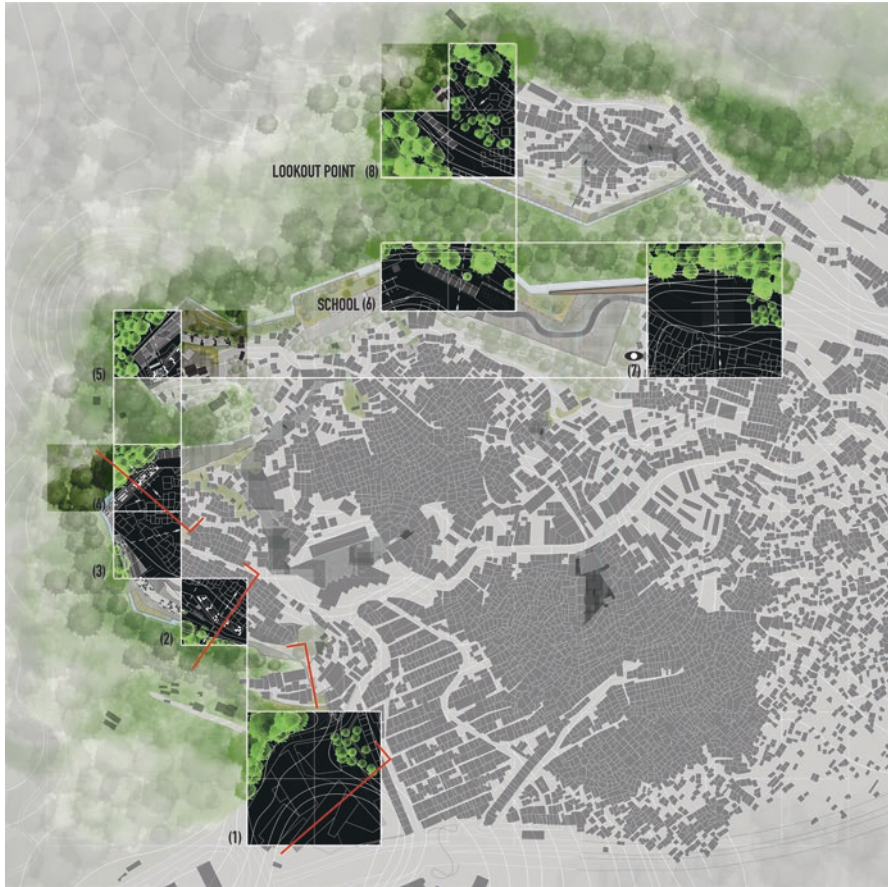


Fig. 14.2 Rocinha: a strategic map of Rocinha, a favela in the south of Rio in-between Leblon and Barra da Tijuca

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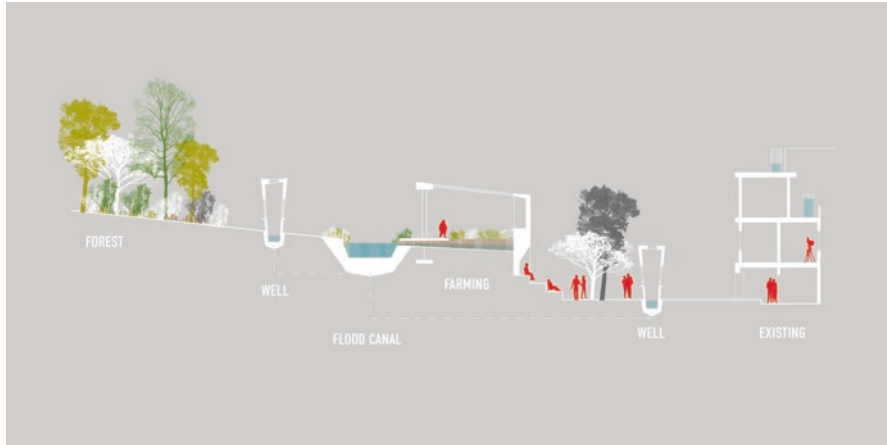


Fig. 14.3 Diagrammatic section at threshold of water collection and farming compared to existing structures

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