

## INFORMAL URBANISM FROM INSIDE-OUT – INTERNALIZING TAIPEI EXPERIENCES OF INFORMALITY

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**ABSTRACT:** Informal urbanism is usually a visual perception about the uncontrollable high-density living in the rapidly urbanized world which adjusts quickly to the collective need and wants without paying regard to dominant law and order. But the collective ensemble of the informal city consists of a multitude of individuals who continue to snatch extra floor areas from the public domain to expand their restricted environment through time-dependent modifications. This paper looks into the process of informalization from inside singular households' living spaces out towards the transitional areas where private and public mix in Taipei's iconic South Airport Apartment. The case study indicates that the informal city is a social reality and a contested space engendered by plebeians' everyday-life tactics.

**KEYWORDS:** informal urbanism, informal city, generic city, informal construction, transitional space, privatizing public space, collective unconscious, everyday-life tactics, South Airport Apartment

### 1. AN OVERVIEW OF TAIPEI'S INFORMALITY

Taiwan's urban milieu has been associated with the growth and the raw vitality of the informal sector<sup>1</sup>; partly due to its third-world and dependant-development experiences of the past, and partly due to the constantly shifting social ground of its immigrant constitution in demographic pattern which has undergone a few times of abrupt population upwelling. Informal urbanism has become Taiwan's urban reality and identity, and to certain degree, reflects the dynamics and the psyche of its immigrant society<sup>2</sup>. Even in the Capital city of Taipei, the informal construction and activities still overwhelm the general urban architecture nowadays and overrule the modern urban landscapes in many aspects. The self-help and self-built building additions on the built units or the sprawling built forms of squatter villages express the need-based construction logic as well as the loose legal execution of the public sector and the futile control of architectural principles.

Class dichotomy and the uneven geographic development which accentuates the polar differences between the center and the periphery are direct contributors to informal urbanism, particularly when the process of urbanization vis-à-vis globalization is brought to light<sup>3</sup>, the internal contradictions of high-density cities often incurs implosion of the informal city. Informal city usually refers to the impoverished, self-built communities or shanty towns within the cities, and according to Wright (2005), "they are at once ephemeral and extensive, irrelevant yet critical, glaringly visible yet seldom observed." Yet it can go so far to depict

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<sup>1</sup> The term 'informal' is often acknowledged as the downside of 'formal' which recognizes and strengthens the western idea of the legal, rational, capitalistic (financial), public, and institutional. The use of 'informal' is therefore controversial that it is subordinate to what is considered 'formal' and indicates phenomena inappropriate for modern urban planning and management even though they may have been existing long before capitalism and state power dictate the world.

<sup>2</sup> The concomitant Taoist religion of the Han-immigrants in Taiwan celebrates worldly affairs and practical gains, and the ever-flowing, boundary-fuzzy activities and events (most significantly, make-shift vendors and stalls that sometimes sprawl into night markets) in front of the Taoist temples are inseparable from the daily living of most Taiwanese towns and cities. Such poly-deity religion spices up the colorful hodgepodge of the urban environment and builds up its social subconscious.

<sup>3</sup> Rural condition of the industrial and post-industrial ages impels migration into the city, and the acceleration of urbanization propelled by globalization has tripled the urban population worldwide in the last three decades. (Harvey, 2000)

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urban scenes associated with the outreach of informal activities – in another word, class does not set the boundary of informality. The political-economy analyses of informal urbanism reveal the structural operations behind the wide-spread phenomena in most developing countries and post-colonial cities, but to further understand the dynamics of informalization, a closer investigation of the everyday-life of the ‘in-between’ is inevitable. ‘Informal’ is not necessarily peripheral or illegal, and en route to formalization, the transitional, the subterranean, or the border acquires an identity of its own. And even in the richer areas of Taipei, traces of informality can hardly escape experiential attentions. One may speculate: what happens to zoning control and state intervention in such a city? Is informality the lingering ghost of its third-world-city past, a foreseeable consequence of a downright mix-use city, ‘real places’ (Clay, 1994) or bewildering landscapes of the ‘generic city’ (Koolhaas, 1994), or an honest mirror of what the city really is?

On one hand, the appearances of informal urbanism are crudely condemned as a shameful blemish of modernization and defiant invasion of public spaces; yet on the other hand, celebrated as an amazing collage of complex urbanism which expresses the true nature of city and denounces the rational self-righteousness of planning. Informal urbanism unveils a probable mechanism of autonomous city building from bottom up, yet it also embodies the daily struggles of common citizens who attempt to filch a short span of living space or subsistent ground. The poetics and politics of urban chaos thus engendered are more than a thin layer of street spectacle or modern banality - they are at the same time an outcome and a critique of structural forces. Such landscapes of collective unconscious are hardly tamable by institutional rules and regulations, but due to the retreat of individual agents in the collective mode of mimicry, the conscious act of resistance is inevitably missing. In this unpretentious and indocile landscape, time is the true planner. And since it does not intend to become certain paradigm, informal urbanism seems to have avoided dominant manipulations and mainstream aesthetic models. The sociology of informal urbanism evolves into its own aesthetics, which divulges unsettled reality of urban living through its fragile, unrestrained, contradictory, and transitional state of being.

Unsurprisingly, the aesthetics of informality and its concomitant scenes of urban everyday life and living in-between infiltrate into contemporary design thinking and artistic conceptualization. “...from a design point of view, informality is a condition of complex, non-linear systems in which patterns overlap, intersect, and mutate in unexpected ways.” Brillembourg, Feireiss, and Klumpner (2005) argue. Balmond (2002) perceives ‘informal’ as “an internalization that moves forward to produce a coherence that is form,” which can be further characterized in three dimensions: local, hybrid, and juxtaposition. Morales (2003), when describing about ‘in-between’ as a “space permanently on the run; a place in itself, a limit made fringe, a border made country,” believes that such project can “attract everything towards itself that it can use to make its own space.” Jacobs (2002) reminds us that many art theoreticians “have shown that the predilection for the everyday and the immanent already constituted the core of modernist art, which swept away classical aesthetic notions of elevation.”

Informal urbanism subverts the classical perspective of art and design by bringing up forefront the mundane and the real. It challenges architectural dictatorship, authorship, and control by expressing idiosyncratic individualities in a collective mode. It responds to the earlier call of Dadaism and Guy Debord’s situationist concept of *detournement* (Careri, 2002), and invites non-exclusive albeit unconscious participations of collage ensemble of urban *readymade* by city inhabitants. It is also attractive in the sense of organic and piecemeal evolution instead of implementations of imposed plans. It is weathered and lived, and here the marks of time inscribe not only the spatial but also the social fabric of the city. The visualization of informal urbanism is not to be achieved by a singular author; therefore, it is collaborative, symbiotic, unpredictable, and open-end in spirit.

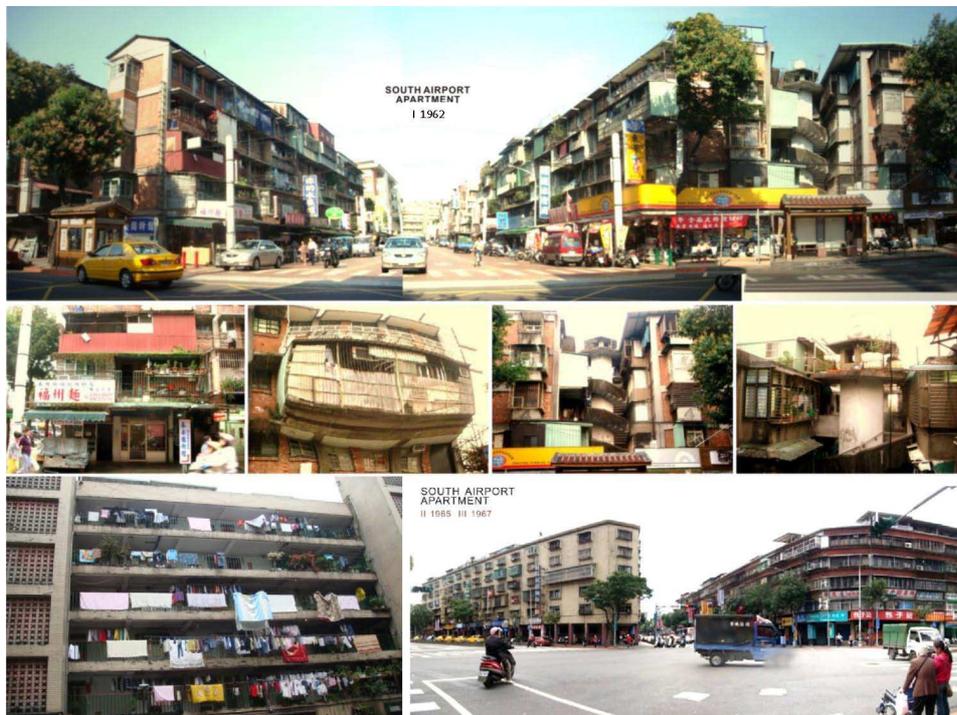
The informal city is to more or less degree out of governmental leash, and as a consequence it turns to the grassroots network and plebeian power to sustain its operation. It has become a more autonomous and flexible city of mutual dependence than its counterpart. The Stealth Group (2001) employs the ‘wild city’ to envision new possibilities of design in two conceptual territories: “the metaphorical, which describes an urban paradigm of wildness; and the strategic, which proposes dynamic design procedures for contemporary environments, shaped by dominant market forces and the decline of institutions.” Evidently, learning from the informal city is an academic new trend to explore alternatives of non-eradicative urban renewal, urban design (for instance, Columbia University Urban Design Program, 2005), and urban studies. Sassen (2005) sees the spaces of intersection in the informal city as ‘analytical borderlands’ since they are spaces “constituted in terms of discontinuities and usually conceived of as mutually exclusive” so that

“discontinuities are given a terrain of operations rather than being reduced to a dividing line.” What used to be reprimanded as visually ruptured and socially blighted is given fresh perspectives as spaces full of subtleties and possibilities.

Yet, how ‘wild’ can a city become, and what is the limit of chaos? How does conscious design intervene in the domain of collective unconscious? These questions do not implore for standard answers, yet even more fundamentally, are there any differences between informal cities of different geographic constraints and social/cultural contexts, and what may those differences imply? If the autonomy of the informal city is congregated by collective ensemble of individual participations, then what is the contribution of the basic unit to the urban spectrum of informality? The following case study of the South Airport Apartment embodies Taipei’s version of informal urbanism and signifies the role of individual households’ living patterns in shaping the informal city.

## 2. SOUTH AIRPORT APARTMENT

Erected in 1962 as one of the first housing projects of Taiwan, the extant South Airport Apartment is symbolic yet aged. It accommodates all walks of life and a wide variety of immigrant backgrounds within small individual units of 26.4m<sup>2</sup>. Except for the toilet and kitchen, all the other family functions are crammed into the same compartment. All together 2972 units in 11 rows of 5-story reinforced-brick blocks (phase I) and two courtyard compounds (phase II & III) make up the socially colorful community (including veterans families, rural immigrants families, single-parent families, single senile-citizen households, local shrines, markets, a huge night market, and so on) at the southwest corner of the city. Connected by spiral and ‘scissors’ stairways between two adjacent buildings, the appearance of the phase I South Airport Apartment still looks unique today (Fig. 1). Local residents nickname the public stairway ‘the flying corkscrew’ as an identifiable landmark whose void column also serves ingeniously as a garbage collector.

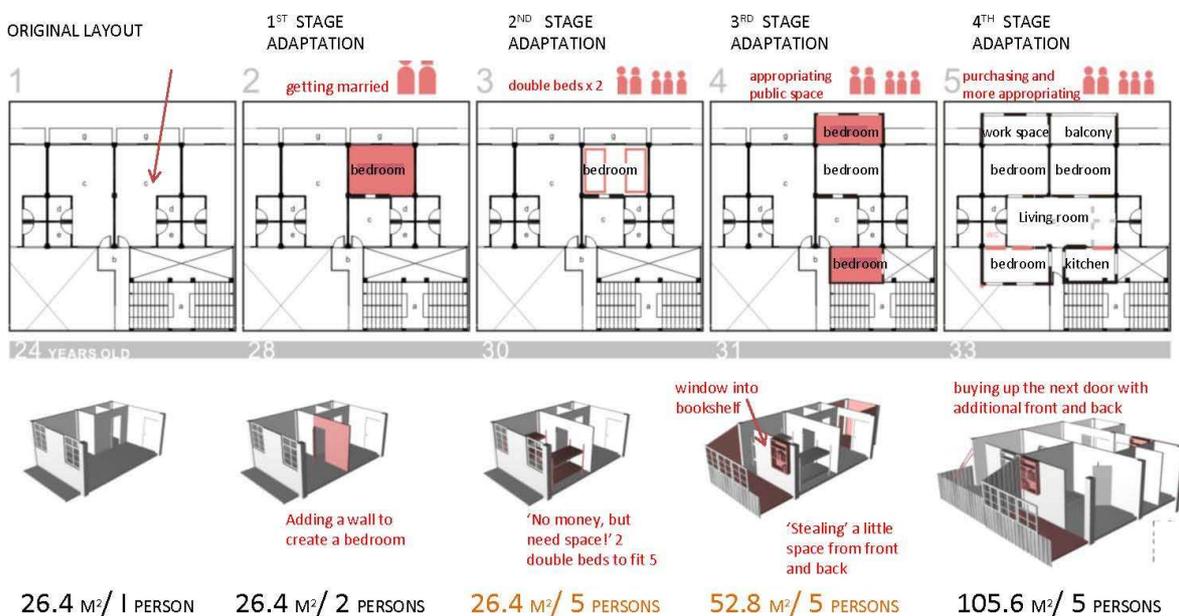


**Figure 1** Images of the three-phase developments of the South Airport Apartment

Back in the 1960s and 1970s, an average household often grew into a family of 5-6 members in the South Airport Apartment. But the original layout of the apartment unit, according to modern-day standard, is best to accommodate one person as a studio suite. Imaginably, as the size of the household expands, the interior space can no longer meet the need and standard of a family. Mr. Chen and his family is a typical case in the South Airport Apartment which gradually transforms one basic living unit for one into a flexible yet awkward condition for five, then, with appropriation and extension, into a semi-duplex for five (Fig. 2). The

process of transformation is incremental and subtle, and the accumulation of the floor area is not always on solid ground. Via the tacit consent of his neighbors and local police body, Mr. Chen achieves his own version of informalization.

When he first bought one basic unit on the third floor of the South Airport Apartment, he was single, young, and poor; and the space was compact and reasonably adjustable. Four years later he got married and subdivided the unit to make room for more privacy. Very soon his three children came along, so his bedroom was modified again to accommodate five by adding more vertical levels. Then he decided to take the risk by ‘stealing’ floor area from the half air and the ‘underused’ public area. He was in the business of small-scale construction and metal material supplier; logically he started his experiment from his own turf. With light steel and metal sheet, he ‘hanged’ an extra bedroom outside the 2<sup>nd</sup>-phase bedroom and ‘installed’ another room at the public verandah. His neighbor considered the verandah as Mr. Chen’s property (similar to the concept of arcade space of the shop-house building type – private land for public use) and did not impede or report his construction. There was an understated understanding that his neighbor might do the same if the illegal expansion was not interfered by the authority, and Mr. Chen would be the ideal hand to hire.



**Figure 2** Evolution of Mr. Chen’s family space on the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor of the South Airport Apartment

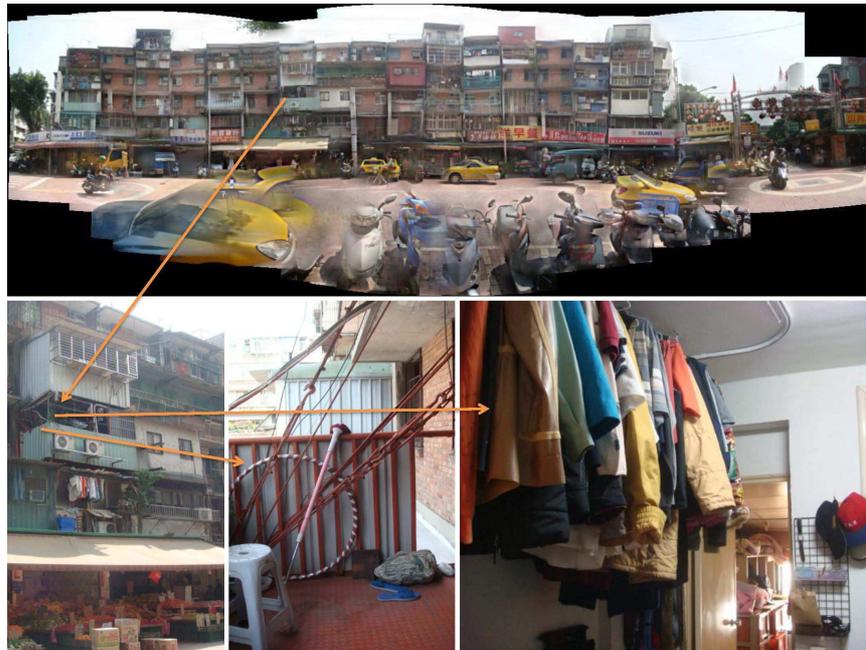
It was the time (1970s) when the informal construction spread like wildfire in the Capital city due to inadequacy of housing policy and provision in the face of rapid urbanization and large-scale rural emigration. Citizens with few resources were impelled to solve the housing problems with their own tactics, and the government had to turn a blind eye to squatting and illegal constructions concerning the consequences and social cost of enforced demolitions. Later when the scale of informal constructions had grown out of proportion, the city government could only confront the issue by inventing an embarrassing categorization of ‘the old old illegal constructions’ to legalize their status and differentiate them from ‘the old new,’ ‘the new old,’ and ‘the new new illegal constructions’ which was regarded as the only illegal mode that needed to be dealt with<sup>4</sup> (Zhang, 1993). Mr. Chen even made a good fortune by professing informal

<sup>4</sup> The non-illegal construction is also non-taxable unless its floor area is registered under the same household

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construction, and in a few years he was able to purchase his next-door unit for the next-stage expansion<sup>5</sup>.

Mr. Chen's transformation tactics is practical and economic. He compartmentalizes interior rooms with light panel walls and relinquishes the use of wall closet for more interchangeability. Instead, he applies hooks and poles to hang items on the walls and under ceiling, which may help to explain why his apartment still looks transitional after decades of living (Fig. 3).



**Figure 3** Looking in from the façade of Mr. Chen's apartment.

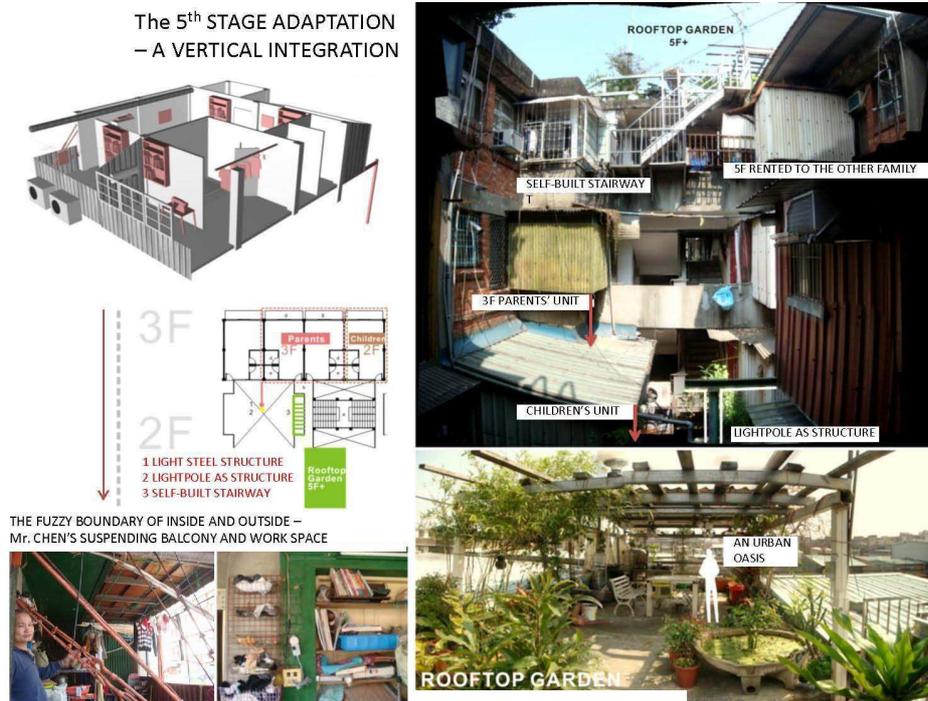
The extended room on the street side was suspended by steel cables on metal sheet surface; and when the exterior wall was internalized, the defunct window sill was immediately adapted as a bookshelf. A few years later when he made enough money to buy the adjacent apartment for further expansion, he tore down the party wall to make a more spacious living room for the family. And for the first time, he was able to work in an independent space or sit on a balcony fronting the street. When his children grew up, he could afford to buy the apartment directly underneath the original unit and another apartment on the 5<sup>th</sup> floor where he could build an access to the rooftop and, like so many urbanites of Taipei who strive to reconnect with even a fragment of nature by potting a couple of plants to occupy a piece of public land as a personal green niche, create an urban oasis of his own<sup>6</sup> (Fig. 4).

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address which is taxable legal property.

<sup>5</sup> Small contractors and material suppliers such as Mr. Chen are indispensable chains to Taiwan's small-scale industry boom. They are dexterous, versatile, resourceful, and community-based. Their network responds quickly to the domestic need yet distinguishes itself from the market dominated by corporate builders and developers.

<sup>6</sup> Altogether Mr. Chen has bought eight units in the South Airport Apartment.



**Figure 4** The vertical integration of Mr. Chen's informal expansion.

The rooftop of the walk-up flat is supposed to be shared by all residents downstairs, but the top-floor unit can easily monopolize the space by blocking the stairway or building an extra shelter to prevent sub-tropical heat and claim private domain all at once. In the real estate trade of Taipei, the top-floor apartment can become more marketable when the rooftop floor area is counted as 'usable' space (for instance, the agency will specify 'registered floor area' and 'usable floor area' for such sale items). The phenomenon fades out quickly in the elevator high-rises, largely due to a different system of subdivision layout and the stationing of a management unit in most high-rises. The continuous skyline of colorful rooftop metal-box additions above the 4- or 5-story apartments is an unmistakable image of Taipei, but Mr. Chen demonstrates an alternative of privatizing and greening rooftop. Informalization can be innovative.

The structure which supports Mr. Chen's extended room on the courtyard side is also inventive - the firm light-pole is treated as the first column to bind later-erected steel poles into a clustered trunk which branches out boughs to scaffold the hanging metal-sheet boxes (Fig. 5). Once the first steel bough stretched into the private room, the rest of the neighborhood followed. Very soon the light shaft of the courtyard was overshadowed by the obtrusive boxes above head. As the courtyard got darker, the less likely it would be appreciated as a public space; expectedly, it was eventually appropriated as an outdoor kitchen. Such privatization of public domain is most common in the informal city; however, the invasion into the public should not be understood only as a provocation against state authority. From certain perspective, it might manifest a mechanism of 'private-public mix' rarely evaluated by general planning discourse and a type of silent negotiation between different individuals through the practice of everyday life (de Certeau, 1984).



**Figure 5** Metal-sheet rooms mounting on the pole trunk at the center of the designated public domain.

In many pre-modern villages before the intervention of planning, the 'public' path evolves out of the setback of building blocks rather than pre-determines the layout of the physical space. The western concept of the public sometimes claims a legitimacy which demarcates spatial hierarchy and order under the manipulations of dictating powers while the time-dependent process of collective living induces a negotiated order out of chaos through the dynamics of territorialization, de-territorialization, and re-territorialization. What is marked as a public building or space is usually operated under strict guidelines and regulations, yet the threshold of the public domain is not well respected by the informal city (in this respect, is a public space with an administrative threshold truly public?). Though the layouts of phase II and phase III of the South Airport Apartment are drastically different from the first phase plan, the public-private contention of space is similar. The 'transitional' space from private to public or vice versa is therefore most expressive of the collective fear and desire of the informal city.

There is no clear consensus regarding the rules of the collective sphere outside individuals' private units, but the transitional spaces expose the internalized code of acceptance. Porch-corridors facing the central court at various levels are the most significant spatial feature of the phase II Apartment, and according to fire code and the apartment management act, they ought to be clean and open to all passersby. Yet these porch-corridors are perfect settings for laundry and drying clothes in the compact living condition of the apartment; and better yet, they fulfill the neighborhood's collective desire for an extended living room (Fig. 6). By scattering used benches and chairs along the corridors, the residents solve the problems of shortage of storage space as well as gain a few usable square meters for small chats or subcontracted homeworking. The dry and bleak atmosphere of the original modernist landscape would suddenly be tinged with an aura of 'human flavor' and colors of individualities whenever the informal activities emerge.



**Figure 6** Transitional spaces between private sphere and public domain in the phase II and phase III of the South Airport Apartment.

Around the edge of the central court at the lower level of the phase III Apartment, small Taoist altars mingle with market stalls and grocery stores and exude a low-key plaza ambiance. These ‘apartment shrines’ are unregistered and excluded by land-use zoning, however, they play crucial roles in the community’s worldly as well as spiritual life along their daily-life routes. Without the prestige of a holy temple or the metaphysical wisdom of Buddhist belief, these altars reflect the mundane values of an immigrant society. Superstition aside, their constant rituals are regarded as nuisance in contemporary urban environment. Yet senile and retired residents always enjoy hanging out with neighbors at the openings around the altars, sitting on the extra chairs donated by various families and drinking many rounds of tea. These transitional areas where private tugs with public are comparable to urban tidal zone that consists of many uncharted habitats for different species. In contrast, the central court is often devoid of human activities.

The tidal zone is a space sensitive to the rhythm of time, and in various types of marketplace in the South Airport Apartment the tide and ebb of market activities manifest the vicissitude of the transitional zone. The morning market occurs in the designated area around the central court of the phase III Apartment, but its internal orientation does not pick up too much vitality from the outsiders and it eventually becomes a laid-back community hangout. Street vendors near the phase I Apartment beckon to the passersby along the street in various time frames, and some of them have gone beyond the cat-and-mouse street game with the policemen by stationing at particular sites and pay monthly ‘penalty’ instead of getting irregular tickets. The transitional zone along the linear apartment blocks fronting the open streets draws in more commercial energy than that in the enclosed courtyard, and engages more actively in constant dialogue with the city beyond.

The famous South Airport night market meandering through the 1<sup>st</sup> phase of the Apartment is especially appreciated by residents and outsiders alike. After decades of evolution, the first street squatter of the night market has become the biggest ‘market-lord’ who collects monthly rent from a sequence of stalls and vendors, and some of whose owners even establish a night-market ‘autonomy’ body to administrate daily affairs and negotiate predictable disputes with the Apartment community, market vendors, and the authority. Every night, the neighborhood streets of the South Airport Apartment are taken back to the pedestrians and the residents regardless of class or race or gender, and the informal city achieves a kind of spatial transformation for general citizens’ benefit without drafting an institutional plan. The informal city is not always an impoverished urban island in Taipei’s situation, it might have infiltrated into the formal city through a grassroots version of spatial reform by collective mobilization.

The mechanism of infiltration also works at a more understated level: the operation of the informal city

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infiltrates and actually helps the functioning of the formal city within the capitalist mode of production and reproduction. It diverts surplus human resources of the formal employment market to a more self-sustaining face-to-face trade of petite commodities in the scale of local street-life, therefore represses the social cost of unemployment which may otherwise jeopardize the authority of the state. It also minimizes the social crises of insufficiency of collective consumption, such as housing and necessary public facilities, by unofficially allowing the plebeian society to self-build and self-adapt. From an individual household to a porch-corridor to an apartment shrine to a street market, these accumulative spaces of different scales somehow broaden the spatial 'in-between' to a social borderland and reach an equilibrium with the formal city. Beyond the informal façade - either as a spectacle or chaos, traces of everyday life continue to weave a rich tapestry of urban narratives.

The South Airport Apartment exhibits informal patterns which can also be identified in Taipei's Hua-Jiang renewal project or the once-landmark buildings such as Lion Plaza and the Cosmopolitan. The former is located near the South Airport Apartment' rundown neighborhood, while the latter high-rise buildings still stand at the most prosperous districts of the city but age not so gracefully into architectures of implosive tension. They are highly mix-used with extremely complicated ownership, thus it's rather difficult for them to be renewed in any sense. They are stranded in time and the temporal 'in-between' adds another dimension to foster the process of informalization. Starting at a random point with an individual's intention, by repetition out of collective unconscious, the informal city covers up the signatures of architects and planners and moves towards an 'emergent' sense of order.

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