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**Goldblatt, David. "Urban Shanties: Improvisation and Vernacular Architecture."  
*Evental Aesthetics* 1, no. 3 (2012): 90-112.**

**ABSTRACT**

The practice of architecture takes place in what is aptly called "an architectural practice." But, in a sense, no architecture takes place there. Unless something outside that practice is built, we merely have plans for architecture, unfulfilled ideas, but nothing that functions or shelters. In this paper, my attempt to show an important connection between improvisation and architecture is about the process of architecture as its execution of a built structure. My idea is to begin with an unheralded example from vernacular architecture, glean from it what I think is improvisational and work with issues I believe are generated from it in order to point out some things about improvisation as well as architecture. That example is the collective of buildings known as the shantytown. The shanty, like the ruin, comes about with "unintentional visual interest" to pervert the phrase of Michael Baxandall, happening as it does without foregrounding concern for architectural beauty or elegance. Philosophical investigations of vernacular architecture are not new, but one where an improvised mode of construction is a serious component of its analysis has largely been passed over. One question I try to answer can put the issue another way: What is the limiting case of improvisation in architecture?

**KEYWORDS**

improvisation, jazz, urban, shantytown, architecture, *favela*

# Urban Shanties: Improvisation and Vernacular Architecture

David Goldblatt

Improvisational architecture and its professional contrasts can form the centerpiece of a narrative that would be a tale of two aesthetics: a tale of two cities, one often embedded in the other. In this essay I attempt to offer what I believe to be a *limiting case* of improvisation in architecture uniquely generated by the practice of building shanties. The unheralded example of the shanty, the *element* in the collective of buildings alternately known as shantytowns or squatter settlements, will help provide comparisons between its construction and standard cases of improvisation in the performing arts, in particular jazz. I choose jazz (noting it is not always improvisational) as a primary type for comparison, although I could have chosen any number of other arts where improvisation is an integral aspect, because a focus on *one* improvisational arena allows for more depth and specificity. My comparative approach will help also to draw lines between professionalism in architecture and the improvisational techniques utilized by the builders of shanties. Shanties, like ruins, come about with “unintentional visual interest,” to pervert the phrase of Michael Baxandall, happening as they do without foregrounding concern for architectural beauty or elegance.<sup>1</sup> While the building of shanties takes

place in many parts of the world, my shanty example will focus on urban Brazil, where the shanty, the *barraco*, multiplies and repeats, to form vast neighborhoods called *favelas*, built by their occupants, *favelados*, often juxtaposing the finely manicured homes of Brazil's well-to-do. In Brazilian cities, as in the shantytowns of Mumbai or Nairobi, the illegal *favelas* have developed into facts of life in urban centers, but always risk being usurped and invaded. In short, utilizing the example of the shanties of the Brazilian *favelas*, I hope to suggest a form of urban architecture in which social and economic circumstances inform personal industrial techniques, and so generate the question of vernacular architecture's relationship with improvisation.



Matt-8o. Shantytown in Soweto, South Africa. Creative Commons.

## • Architecture as Improvisation •

### .1.

The practice of architecture takes place in what is aptly called "an architectural practice." But, in a sense, no architecture takes place there. The old but dubious (ontological) chestnut, "There is no such thing as paper architecture," suggests that unless something outside that practice is built, we merely have plans for architecture, unfulfilled ideas, but

nothing that functions or shelters, no spaces to enter, work, live or leave. Architecture, in this sense, always lies outside its own practice, and happens only when a plan or concept is put into its material form as built structure.

Improvisation and architecture are rarely mentioned in the same breath. One reason, of course, is that no non-performance arts are *standard* cases of improvisation arts where improvisation *typically* takes place. Architecture appears as the most planned of all the arts, so that the final material work is a finished product that maintains a strict one-to-one relationship with the initial specifications. For that reason as well, architecture would seem to be the least likely artistic domain where improvisation would play a role. The pre-history of a finished architectural project – part of its *generative* performance, to use David Davies' term, is not usually understood as a performance-event even if some construction sites are spectacles of visual attention. Yet Davies' performist theory holds that a work is a particular kind of *doing*, an event in a particular history of making, whose focus is the product of that activity and completes it – the activity itself being what he terms its performance.<sup>2</sup>

Davies' thesis is particularly pertinent to the doings of the *favelado*, since the conditions under which he locates his building materials and executes his necessary skills, the manner and extent to which there are *ad hoc* decisions, is essential for appreciating the achievement of the *favelado* and correctly assessing the resulting shanty. The work of the *favelado* in building his or her own house is a unique kind of urban industry (borne out by the etymology of the word, where industry once stood for diligence and skill), and it is an industry on a large scale for the development of housing, one industrious undertaking at a time.<sup>3</sup> The process of building shanties is an industry, a branch of manufacture, one among many in the typical *favela*, that is strictly illegal but is tolerated as a de facto form of life. The industrious qualities of the *favelado* and the pragmatic exercise of those in the often difficult circumstances of improvisation, betrays the lie that those living on the margins of society are there because of their own lack of purpose.

## . 2 .

The gap between architects and builders is analogous to the space between composers and musicians, choreographers and dancers – musical scores analogous to architectural plans. Music and dance require what J. O. Urmsion calls executant artists, thereby suggesting that dance and music have a double set of artists where, in the usual case, the latter is given a serious interpretive role, one where improvisation happens.<sup>4</sup> By contrast, in professional or high architecture, builders, though they are executants, are offered plans but not usually creative possibilities.

What Garry Hagberg calls “the diversity of the very concept of improvisation as it is manifested in different art forms” suggests to me that the characteristics that would count toward marking an art form as improvisational, might differ from art to art with respect to such concepts as interpretation, audience and auditor.<sup>5</sup> And, since architecture seems to be outside the range of what is sometimes thought of as a pure art (as it is mixed with utilitarian concerns), we might expect that improvisational aspects of architecture might differ as well from paradigmatic improvisational forms like dance, acting and music.

Architects can, of course, improvise on sketchpads and computer screens until some workable notion takes form, later to be made into a real building. However, the kind of work I am going to consider is somewhat different, in that the improvisational aspects of the shanty are process-directed. Improvisation takes place during the activity of building, which skips the blueprints, renderings, and client/designer conferences that are essential to the generative process of professional architecture. And it goes almost without saying that layers of permission papers, the work of lawyers and insurers, have been passed over, as the very concept of property has shifted when squatters build on unoccupied land. In Robert Neuwirth’s book, *Shadow Cities: a Billion Squatters, a New Urban World*, he says that in Rio de Janeiro one million people live in *favelas*, thirty-thousand homes in Roncinha alone, the largest of them. He says, “they don’t own the land, but they hold it. And no one contests their possession.”<sup>6</sup>

### .3 .

As vernacular or anonymous architecture, the shanty can be ignored only at the risk of claiming that residential architecture belongs solely to the well-off. In writing about Sprio Kostof's inclusive *A History of Architecture*, Andrew Ballantyne says, "buildings turn into architecture when we feel that we should notice them and treat them with respect, and this can happen to any building."<sup>7</sup> Alan Colquhoun notes professional architecture's links with money and taste. He says:

With architecture we are so bound to the sources of finance and power, it is much more difficult for the architect than for other artists to operate within an apparently autonomous sub-culture or to retain independence from bourgeois taste that has been the ambition of art since the early nineteenth century.<sup>8</sup>

Colquhoun may be exaggerating the contrast here between architecture and other arts, but there have always been reasons to consider architecture a more negotiated or compromised art in the first place, making those comparisons more difficult, even among arts of the third dimension. Philosophical investigations of vernacular architecture are not new, but such investigations that include an improvised mode of construction as a serious component of its analysis have largely been passed over.

### • The Shanty and the Shantytown •

### .4 .

The shantytown is a misnomer — a vast understatement — once it is understood that millions live in such towns across the globe, and that many mimic in scope and population the grander cities in which they are embedded. In terms of an aesthetics, it appears as if the shanty, magnified by the town, was a postmodern antidote to modernist formalism. That is,

in contrast with European modern architecture, the shanty is eclectic in its use of materials, ornamented by graffiti and mural painting, unclear with respect to geometrical form and often colorful to an extreme. Shanties embody the marginality of the human condition in the tainted universe that runs parallel to those of comfort and abundance. These towns, often thought of as rural places within urban areas, are obvious in cities like Mumbai (where half the city's population are squatters), Lima, Mexico City, Hong Kong, Karachi, Nairobi and the urban underworlds such as those hidden in defunct New York City subway tunnels. During the American Depression, shanties became towns called Hooverilles and in migrant workers' housing such as Homestead or Belle Glade, where "families had constructed small shacks from scavenged tin, wood, and canvas in a swamp cane clearing."<sup>9</sup>

Since it is difficult to think of the shanty without thinking of the town, perhaps a word should be said about the relationship between the individual shanty and the shantytown in which it is usually embedded. Unlike Brasilia (Oscar Niemeyer) or Chandigarh (Le Corbusier) and other planned cities and communities, the shanties in Rio, Brazil come together to form *favelas* over long periods of time, without regard for what has come before or may come after them. As with a development like Levittown or the New York City skyline, shantytowns amaze in their breadth and scope. In architecture, as in other arts, repetition and quantity are powerful aesthetic factors. These qualities attributed to clusters of buildings, form types, which may in turn come to signify socioeconomic conditions. For example, Manhattan seen from afar has come to represent urban wealth and power, just as Levittown has emerged as a prototype of suburban sameness, independent of its composing elements. The *favelas* have emerged as worlds of the underclass — a forbidden mixture of bare survival, uncertainty, and gratitude — the shanty being one factor among many in their notorious reputation. Though memorable and impacting, the aesthetic value of the *favelas* is relevant to, but independent of, the improvised individual buildings that comprise them. However, just to be clear, the shantytowns do not share the improvisational nature of the shanty although, like the shanty, they are unplanned. Unlike the shanty, there is no single builder at work for the town. So that while the shanty approaches an improvised architecture, the shantytown lies outside the category of being improvised or not, given its long-term emergence by many individuals independently, so that, while one can argue that there is an improvised element to the town as well as the shanty, it would be odd, at least to my ear, to say a town, generally speaking, is improvised.

Nevertheless, there is a certain random aspect to the constructed progress of each. Comparing an individual shanty to a shantytown is comparable in its perceptual impact to likening a snowflake to a snowstorm or a single tile to a complex mosaic.

Beauty aside, but in terms of a general aesthetic response, shantytowns, or repeated and compacted sets of individual shanties, are among the most powerful building complexes on the planet. *Favelas* provide immediate insight into living outside the law and coping with the situation of poverty. The *favelas* embody what everyone already knows — that the gap between the rich and poor is enormous. This gap is evident not only in demographic and financial figures, but also in self-built communities, living urbanity within urbanity. An outside observer, upon seeing the *favelas* for the first time, is struck hard by their crowding and vastness spread along hillsides barely safe for habitation. This impact is certainly comparable to the shock of the sublime, where all rationality is momentarily wiped away. But it is knowing the history of this architecture, the cognitive inseparable from the affective, that regulates the power of the *favelas* in outside perceivers. Part of this aesthetic package has something to do with *danger*. There is the understood peril of living on grounds that can mudslide with any sudden flood, the danger of inadequate and uncaring police and fire protection or of disease from inferior sewage and trash pickup, and the ever-present threats of demolition by forces hoping to provide additional land for tourism, developers and investors (in Rio for the forthcoming Olympics, for example) who know where land is available cheaply but located ideally in urban centers. While we can refer to shantytowns as cities within cities, the differences are clear enough. In the *favelas*, for example, no roads exist leading up the steep hillsides for cars or trucks — only *becos*, narrow dirt pathways that twist and turn, some of which are now cemented stairways but are still formidable climbs. Nevertheless, life has become normalized and stable, towns playing by their own set of rules regarding electricity and sewage, water and trash, often negotiating deals with those forces on the outside.





Nate Cull. Brazilian *Favela*. Creative Commons.

The aesthetic power of shanties came to the attention of the photographer Margaret Morgan, who shot pictures of improvised shelters in large American cities and published them in her book *Fragile Dwelling*. In the introduction to that book, Alan Trachtenberg writes:

In 1989, Morton observed a settlement of improvised shacks and tents that had mushroomed near her home (in New York City), a community of “fragile dwellings” pieced together out of every imaginable shred of material at hand for scavengers of the city’s bourgeois debris. Here was a kind of vernacular architecture that instantly caught her photographic eye...<sup>10</sup>

. 5 .

*Favelas* are models of the changing and complex reality of the individual shanty. Built by squatters on public land owned largely by the Navy, or privately owned but unused property, *favelas* have grown over many decades within urban Brazil, their illegality putting their residents at risk. The largest *favelas*, such as the Rinchoa, have evolved from primitive shanties to more permanent brick-and-mortar buildings, especially for the older residents of the neighborhood. But even these developed urban

enclaves began as simple *barracos* that resemble shanties all over the world. Here is an account of the building of an individual shanty in Rio, offered by Julio César Pino in 1997.

The *favelados* had to reinvent themselves and devise survival strategies to keep their hard-won homes. Strangers in a strange land, they used heads and hands to fashion a home with only the basic elements of earth, water and fire...Molding clay or mud with bare fingers, they pasted pieces of bamboo together and erected walls, using string or cloth to hold the four intersections. Overhead they raised roofs made of tin cans, zinc, cardboard, and, for the lucky ones, tile...Beams overlapped, angles failed to meet, and the structure seemed to have been built by a blind person or an architect with a malicious sense of humor. The shanty was never finished – its construction was a constant chore, and its features changed from one week to the next...Squatters improvised city services easily available to the middle and upper classes...Ask anyone who saw a *favela* only from the outside for his or her most memorable impression, and the likely reply is "garbage."<sup>11</sup>

For the most part, in that shantytowns are usually unsanitary, overcrowded, and unorganized – they are a far cry from the emptiness or purity of a modernist ethos. One thing that warrants the shanty's place among the improvised arts is its composition without plan or preparation – certainly without the kind of lengthy or meticulous preparation practiced in architecture generally – a point I will try to embellish later. As all improvisations are informed by their *constraints*, shanties must satisfy the laws of gravity and strength of materials while lying outside the laws of building codes and property taxes. Politicians will let *favelados* be, as compromises for and electoral favors from the poor. Regular tours of the *favelas* are offered at Rio's five-star hotels and other tourist centers, except when conditions are too dangerous due to drug wars or mudslides. From one point of view, the shanty is a third-world structure with a first-world audience.

The year 1960 saw the opening of Brasilia, Brazil's new capital on its Planalto Central. With Lúcio Costas as its main planner and Oscar Niemeyer as its primary architect, the intent, in part, was to open the vast interior of Brazil to its heavily populated coastline and to help centralize commerce and tourism. Many gems of modern architecture adorned the city, attracting visitors and helping to persuade government officials to live the life of the new capital and to keep from running back to Rio and Sao Paulo at every opportunity. The opening of Brasilia also saw at its

periphery new shantytowns, built with discarded materials from their construction sites, by the very workers who had built the spanking new capital and who sought menial jobs there. The shanties were not part of the original city plan. Laid out for the automobile and those who owned them, the long boulevards of Brasilia are empty of people in comparison with the bustling life of the squeezed shanties.

## • Comparisons with Jazz •

.6 .

*Favelados* are hands-on builders, *bricoleurs*, whose materials are whatever they can get – ad hoc assemblers with a multiplicity of resourceful skills. Jacques Derrida notes that Levi-Strauss uses the word *bricoleur* in contrast with the word *engineer*. Discussing mythologies in *The Savage Mind*, Levi-Strauss, holds that *bricolage*, as distinct from engineering, “builds its castles out of debris.”<sup>12</sup> Derrida, objecting to a sharp distinction between the two, especially in the context of discourse, says:

The idea of the engineer breaking with all *bricolage* is dependent on a creationist theology. Only such a theology can sanction an essential difference between the engineer and the *bricoleur*. But, that the engineer should always be a sort of *bricoleur* should not ruin all criticism of *bricolage*.<sup>13</sup>

I take this to mean that a comparison of the two terms should not imply that the engineer (of which the architect is a species), while attempting to plan each and every detail of construction, is not entirely independent from whatever is already there for him: the technology, the availability of purchased materials, the tradition into which he or she enters the business. However, the *relative* distinction between the two should now be clear.

It would not be difficult to imagine musical improvisation as something of a *bricolage*, playing into form the unorganized notes and phrases with the available instrumental technology. Like musical

improvisations, but unlike the sorry Manchester slums described by Friedrich Engels, shanties are self-constructions, immediate in the sense that there is no other builder than the dweller, no intermediary between builder and built, as there is none between Charlie Parker and the runs he improvises within precomposed tunes, where composition and construction is conflated. (It is something like the generation of dreams.) As Charlie Parker is present to his music, as we are present to our speech (unlike the architect to his architecture), the *favelado* is present to his individual shanty, where his act of composition is also, at the same time, his act of construction.

In several subgenres of jazz, like smooth jazz and much straight-ahead jazz, improvisation aims at melodic and harmonic “coherence”; whereas in the shanty, “the look” of improvisation remains eclectic and fragmentary in color and form, due to the diversity of building materials and the imperfection of the final product. However, jazz improvisation also has been called an imperfect art, and in both performing jazz and building the shanty, the appearance of imperfection adds an aesthetic element that is lacking in non-improvised practices which aim at “flawless” presentations. As Pino has noted, imperfections loom large in shanties – our response is often to note their flawed appearance. To a different extent and in another kind of circumstance, Lee B. Brown notes that “a residual imperfection can be regarded as a vital aspect of improvised jazz.”<sup>14</sup> Brown sees this possible imperfection as a result of the adventuresome nature of some improvisations – the musician’s willingness to take risks is tied to the near inevitability of mistakes. Imperfections, then, can be signs of improvised work by virtue of the risks, the chances taken in improvised performance, and are an important part of the expectations of auditors, as opposed, for example, to those using or simply viewing, bridges. In art generally, we utilize the idea of the magnificent failure, often appraised higher than a safer success.

Clearly, in attempting to show a strong resemblance between architectural improvisations and other arts of performance, I have chosen jazz music to the exclusion of most other arts only to make a comparison that is workable in a short paper. As mentioned earlier, this is not to say that a worthwhile juxtaposition could not be made for acting, dance, for stand-up comedy, or for other forms of music, for example, all of which might have done just as well. And then, one might look at the many ways improvisation takes place outside the arts and in everyday life, not the least of which are in conversation, sports and war.

Most of us, it must be said, have never heard the famous *Body and Soul*, as played by Coleman Hawkins, that is, have not heard it in person as an improvisational performance coming into being. Most of us have heard it, however, as recorded product knowing that part of its history is its improvisation, and to understand the work in that way makes a difference, just as knowing the improvised history of shanty construction makes a difference to our appreciation of shanties.

Pino says, "The shanty is never finished."<sup>15</sup> By this I think he means, not only "unfinished" in the sense of not polished or perfected, but also that, with the availability of newly found usable construction debris, or the opportunity of attaining materials by barter or purchase, new fragments can continually replace old ones or add to existing constructs. And, in some cases, what begins as a shanty can be transformed bit by bit into a dwelling of a more favorable nature — something more stable and livable. This might entail major renovations or simply a matter of repair and damage control, better parts substituting for weaker ones, as when an editor cuts and pastes a film montage. The shanty is, after all, an architectural montage, fragments pieced together, arranged to produce an obvious whole.

Shanties are unfinished, too, in that they are a constant chore. Interesting that William Day, writing on improvisation, cites Ralph Waldo Emerson's claim connecting the incompleteness of art with the incompleteness of self, and then says, "I have claimed that jazz improvisations are essentially incomplete in a further sense in that their ground is ordinary on-going activity rather than sculpted time."<sup>16</sup> While Day is rather brief on this contrast, I believe he means that during a jazz performance, there is no orchestrated ending — that the musicians can, in principle, continue playing without a finish. The tune just comes to an end at some unforeseen but appropriate point, although an auditor knows that the performance could have continued. A crude analogy might be between sports with clocks, like basketball and football, and then baseball, where the game can continue pretty much indefinitely.

Here we might recall Wittgenstein's aphoristic remark that, "Working in philosophy — like work in architecture in many respects — is really more a working on oneself."<sup>17</sup> By virtue of this self-created work comes a creation of self — the identity of Coltrane with his work and the identity of the *favelado* as a person with a home, a homeowner, as no longer homeless, by virtue of his or her work. What this means is that, for example, Charlie Parker will now "live" with every tune he plays as

something like an immediate if temporary legacy, in the same way the *favelado* lives in or with his own *baracco*, just as he is marked by the *favela*, the broader neighborhood that he calls home.

One of the roots of improvisational practices is resourcefulness — the appropriate use of available elements within a given structure or set of constraints, within a given context or tradition and for a given purpose. In the first stages of construction, the shanty exhibits the resourcefulness of the *favelado*, displaying whatever building materials are randomly available — typically plywood, corrugated metal, plastic sheets, abandoned blocks and the like. Building shanties is making of these unordered items a livable shelter. The found materials, industrial bric-a-brac for the most part, can be pieced together in a montage of shelter where metal or plastic can be roof or wall or floor and then, later, interchanged. The similarity of materials generates a certain serious similarity among a community of shanties while details of construction vary according to circumstance, making each shanty different in some small way from every other. The jazz musician finds affordances in a limited set of possible notes, chord sequences, rhythms, tones, moods, even instruments, in a way not entirely unlike the *favelado's* identification and use of simply available. And, it might be noted, the more the available material — the more the musician is capable of playing or the more building materials available to the builder — the greater the possibilities of creation.<sup>18</sup> It has been suggested, by Philip Alperson among others, that spontaneity is an important ingredient in improvisation.<sup>19</sup> It would be difficult to understand what “spur of the moment” creation might mean for architecture even in the temporality of the building process, and it may well be that spontaneity has no role there as it does in acting or jazz. Let's see.

Spontaneity has two conditions — an epistemic or referential one and a temporal one. In improvisational music, the musician doesn't quite know what will happen next in the sense that there is no set plan to which he or she can refer. Put another way, if spontaneity is defined referentially, that is, as having no reference to a prior *set* of plans or directions, then the shanty can well be spontaneous in this sense. It is building without specifications — no plans, elevations, cross-sections or renderings. Spontaneity involves, as Curtis Carter puts it, “suspension of set structures for a practice and the introduction of nontraditional elements.”<sup>20</sup> Spontaneity is production that is unplanned or unrehearsed. While building a shanty calls for a certain on-the-spot deliberation, the

distinction between specified conception and practical execution disappears.

In architecture, there is nothing equivalent to the temporal conflation of creation and making that takes form in improvised music, dance or acting. However, within the confines of architecture, the immediacy of shanty construction minimizes the temporal gap between conception and construction relative to say, the World Trade Center “rebuilding,” a subject of prolonged debate and competition, or an iconic architectural residence that results from exchanges between architect and client. In the shanty, the immediacy stems not from something like instantaneous self-expression but rather from an urgency to stay out of the weather, to be unhomeless as quickly as possible. For that reason, shanties may be put together by utilizing available materials when they are available – putting to use what may be gone before too long. From one perspective, this reuse can be understood as a form of recycling, as the extent to which castoff materials constitutes a serious percentage of the elements of building.

Nonetheless, in the making of the shanty, composition and the act of composing occur roughly together, but it is composition and performance in the general sense of putting elements together while the work is being performed – performed in what I had previously mentioned as David Davies’ sense of performance: the total process of achievement, not just the finished product, counts as “the work.”

## .7.

Davies distinguishes between *improvisational interpretation*, *improvisational composition* and *pure improvisation* in musical works, such that the first, but not the latter two, involve a pre-existing instantiated work.<sup>21</sup> I am interested in how Davies’ distinctions apply or do not apply to professional architecture and the shanty, keeping in mind that the later is something else entirely.

In improvisational interpretation, Davies is interested in an already existing, performed work, and so simply assumes that an improvisation of a work, most often of the same name, would be an interpretation of that

work.<sup>22</sup> Here, improvisations are shifts or pivots from something that may be familiar, a stated melody for example, toward something new, perhaps even only nominally related to the original work, but which may soon take on the appearance of a new work, something unfamiliar that is not so much an interpretation as a continuation by other means.

Clearly, what I am calling interpretation is neutral with respect to improvisation. In the case of attempting to match an architectural typology, for example building a recognizable church, the professional architect may interpret, but would not improvise. It is a matter of planning and forethought, with the usual divisions of labor between planner and builder. That there are improvisational aspects during the planning stage is quite another matter. In professional architecture, traditional or cultural typologies sometimes determine the next instantiation of a building, as with a Catholic church or state capital. Architects intend to build churches that look like churches. So it can be said, that although with different site conditions and programmed needs, the architect, in building a church, would be interpreting “church” for the clients, informed, one might say, by previous churches. Here, a pre-existing body of work or tradition is generalized or cartooned as a type of work.

However, Davies says, “If a performance-event is a genuine instance of *pure improvisation*, then no degree of similarity in a subsequent performance-event renders the latter another performance of the same work.”<sup>23</sup> For the typical shanty, only similarity of circumstances, such as the availability of similar materials, skills and tools, would account for a similarity of results. Analogous with available shanty material are notes and instruments as musical material, instruments or tools for building musical compositions. What is interesting is that while the builder of shanties is aware of other shanties, if not of a long tradition of such structures, he or she does *not* intend to build another one like those that exist but instead aims to build an inhabitable shelter. The *barraco* builder, for example, is composing but not imitating or interpreting and so, if anything the shanty would fall under the rubric of Davies’ *pure improvisation*, even if there were a well known, easily recognizable type called “the shanty.” What it lacks is an intention to be part of that tradition or to copy instantiations of that tradition — the construction being only the best it can be under the (often difficult) circumstances.



Martin Heidegger has noted that houses, buildings as dwellings, constitute acts of concealment — being at home conceals the uncanny, the unhomey. Domestic comforts, he says, repress authenticity. While Heidegger draws conceptual and etymological lines between building and dwelling, the occupants of shanties live the intimacy of dwelling in what they've built. According to the architect Mark Wigley, Heidegger's speculation means that "[i]t is therefore the homeless who come nearest to the essence of home that can never simply be occupied."<sup>24</sup> The *favelados* may have come as close to homelessness as anyone in a home may do, and so, if Wigley is correct, to understanding what constitutes dwelling, homeliness or being at home. And it is exactly what strikes us when we are present to these shanties — that these are dwellings as close to homelessness as it gets, temporally and materially, and that part of our morbid fascination is that such houses *exist at all* — a feeling we get about Christo's wrapped structures or prehistoric cave drawings, for example. That people actually live in such places, that life takes place under such conditions is part of the impact of the shanties. Of course, this raises questions of just who "we" are, as the issue of who the appropriate auditors of particular artworks are, prevails throughout art. The answer is less likely to be the *favelado* — a participant in the improvisation — than one comfortably estranged from the slum-like circumstances of the *favelado's* eclectic, but often ingenious, constructions. It is the "we" of the other. We know the improvisational nature of the history of these buildings — how they came about. Part of *our* response, as I've tried to suggest, is as unrehearsed as the buildings themselves, and is not unlike our response to improvised music. In a variety of ways, then, shanties make a formalist view irrelevant.

## • Improvisation and Other Matters •

Following a serious riot in the Morro da Providência, Rio's oldest *favela*, the French artist JR used the sides of shanties that overlook the heart of that city to emphasize architecturally the idea of the other. His works, covering the facades of several shanties and staring down at another social class, "were women's eyes, printed in black-and-white and pasted on

shanties made from brick and concrete. Some of them were framed in extreme closeup, some in shots that revealed faces that were melancholic, dignified, implacable."<sup>25</sup> In addition to the shanties' material representation of the abstraction of class, the murals of JR emphasize, by virtue of their decorative and explicitly political content, the breach with modernist formalism.

To take a cue from Arthur Danto, one can imagine that an improvised piece, like a dance performance, is perceptually indiscernible from a non-improvised one. Ontologically, they are two different works. Part of our response to a work has to do with our expectations – with the history or narrative of the tradition, performer, choreographer and the like. But expecting improvisation or knowing that it is or will be a part of a work changes the way we appreciate the piece. Not to see shanties this way would be to repress a portion of their strong aesthetic power.

## . 9 .

Jeff Wall's *After Invisible Man by Ralph Ellison, the Prologue* (1998–2000) is a large (5' 8 1/2" x 8' 2 3/4") backlit Cibachrome photograph. It is of a constructed, contrived scene, a man crouching in a room without windows –Wall's interpretation of the astonishing first pages of Ellison's seminal novel. The depicted room contains the 1,369 light bulbs that line the walls and ceilings – the light that generates the antithesis of invisibility. In the novel, the lighting is an act of self-construction, an invention built beyond function. The protagonist tells us, "I've wired the entire ceiling, every inch of it...An act of sabotage, you know. I've already begun to wire the wall. A junk man I know, a man of vision, has supplied me with wire and sockets...When I finish all four walls, then I'll start on the floor. Just how that will go, I don't know."<sup>26</sup> The protagonist considers himself in "the great tradition of American tinkers," while Wall imagines the room filled with objects of all other sorts that seem arbitrary, disheveled and out of place – draped, hanging objects, things lying on the floor and over furniture, seemingly without practical purpose.

Wall shows us this "warm hole" as an unorthodox room alienated from its original purpose. It is hyperbole for the everyday transformations in which "stuff" meddles with original plans and built places. It is like the

realm of ordinary improvisations, which sometimes regulate our conversations, shopping, sports worlds, writing and dressing. In the endlessly repetitive architectures of suburban developments and apartment houses, it is often ornamentation (not always, but often) – the yard ornaments, the landscaping and barbeque pits, the house-painting and Christmas lights, that constitute attempts to set neighbor apart from neighbor that are not found in any blueprints. These, too, come close to architectural improvisations – shifting aesthetic response, constructing new identities as if they were variations on, interpretations of, the buildings they adorn. Similarly, Neuwirth says of the inhabitants of the shanties, “The squatters, by building their own homes, are creating their own world.”<sup>27</sup> In his “warm hole,” the Invisible Man creates his identity as he improvises his own world.

Wall’s photograph displays a room antithetical to the so-called “neutron bomb” effect that generally characterizes architectural photography, especially modernist depictions of architectural spaces. Explaining this effect, Mary Woods says, “The buildings are intact, but almost all traces of human presence are erased.”<sup>28</sup> The decorum or absence of human activity, emphasizing a formalist ethos, and uniformity of objects of style, are nowhere to be found in Wall’s *Invisible Man*.

## • Some Concluding Remarks •

• 10 •

In 1988, Philip Johnson and Mark Wigley curated an exhibition of Deconstructivist Architecture at New York’s Museum of Modern Art. The term “deconstructivist” refers to the art of the Russian avant-garde Constructivists, not the deconstructionist work of contemporary Europe associated with Jacques Derrida, but similarities and overlaps abound. The show documented the work of such architects as Frank Gehry, Rem Koolhaas, Peter Eisenman, Zaha Hadid, Daniel Libeskind and the firm Coop Himmelblau. In the catalogue, Wigley writes:

Architecture is a conservative discipline that produces pure form and protects it from contamination. The projects in this exhibition mark a

different sensibility, one in which the dream of pure form has been disturbed. Form has become contaminated. The dream has become a nightmare. It is the ability to disturb our thinking about form that makes these projects deconstructive. It is not that they derive from the mode of contemporary philosophy known as “deconstruction”...[rather] deconstruction gains all its force by challenging the very values of harmony, unity, and stability, and proposing instead a different view of structure: the view that the flaws are intrinsic to the structure.<sup>29</sup>

I cannot resist adding that whether deconstructivist or deconstructionist, the architects in the MOMA show, many of whom have since risen to the top of their field, have produced buildings that in certain respects resemble features of the shanties. One might think of the fragmented, twisted titanium on Gehry’s celebrated Bilbao Guggenheim Museum. Architectural deconstruction may consider itself a threat to the status quo of orthodox architecture and its perceived architectural essence, but shanties are threats in a deeper, more powerful sense, to the middle-classes and to the cities they occupy.

Throughout this paper, I have tried to offer comparisons between standard cases of improvisational performance and the building of shanties. In doing so, I believe I have put forth an analysis of a process of construction for an important and powerful aspect of vernacular architecture, one unusual as an object of aesthetic interest. From the particular case of the shanty as it continues to appear in the *favelas* of the urban areas of Brazil, I generalize in order to foreground what I believe is a limiting case of improvisation in architecture, an example remote from the planned and moneyed professionalism of high architecture. Taken in vast numbers, the shanty has come to form functional neighborhoods as communities for large urban populations, and deserves the attention of philosophers who are concerned with issues of cultural importance. So then, I think of this paper as an account of improvisational building — widespread construction that comes into existence by a process significantly resembling, in several respects, improvisation in the performing arts, particularly jazz where it is often at the core of understanding the music.

## • Notes •

<sup>1</sup> Michael Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 41-73.

<sup>2</sup> David Davies, *Art as Performance* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> The Middle English word *industrie* meant skill and the Latin *industria* meant diligence.

<sup>4</sup> J. O. Urmson, "Literature as a Performing Art," in David Goldblatt and Lee B. Brown, eds, *Aesthetics: A Reader in Philosophy of the Arts*, (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2005), 346-347.

<sup>5</sup> Garry Hagberg, "Forward: Improvisation in the Arts," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 58, no. 2 (Spring 2000), 95. I am particularly grateful for this Special Issue of the Journal as an excellent source for improvisation.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Neuwirth, *Shadow Cities: A Billion Squatters, a New Urban World* (Routledge: New York, 2006), 3.

<sup>7</sup> Andrew Ballantyne, ed., *What is Architecture?* (Routledge: New York, 2002), 12.

<sup>8</sup> Alan Colquhoun, "Postmodernism and Structuralism: A retrospective Glance," *Assemblage* 5: 7-8.

<sup>9</sup> Mary N. Woods, *Beyond the Architect's Eye* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 194.

<sup>10</sup> Alan Trachtenberg, "Introduction" in Margaret Morgan, *Fragile Dwelling*, (Reading, PA: Aperture, 2000) 5.

<sup>11</sup> Julio César Pino, *Family and Favela* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1997), 52-54.

<sup>12</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), 139.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Lee B. Brown, "'Feeling My Way': Jazz Improvisation and Its Vicissitudes — A Plea for Imperfection," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 58, no. 2 (Spring 2000), 119.

<sup>15</sup> Pino, *Family and Favela*, 53.

<sup>16</sup> William Day, "Knowing as Instancing: Jazz Improvisation and Moral Perfectionism," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 58, no. 2 (Spring 2000), 105.

<sup>17</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, edited by G. H. von Wright, trans. by Peter Winch, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 16e.

<sup>18</sup> We can compare, for the moment, professional architecture's binary opposition of architect and builder to the Cartesian mind/body opposition, the spatial existence of the builder being subjected to the will of the architect, neither doing the work of the other. Moreover, in the usual case, neither architect nor builder remains as dweller. The comparison here becomes more complex if we extend the imagined separation of mind and body of the architect and builder to mirror the relationship between those living outside the *favelas* and those on the inside. The outside, or body, doing the work of the inside or mind—leasing by the well-to-do doing the menial labor that they themselves

find undesirable. On the other hand, to push this exaggeration further, the improvised labor of the *favelado* in building and directing his or her own home, within the limits of circumstance, is an anti-Cartesian unalienated process in which the dislocation of builder and built does not occur. It is a crude Lockean model of transforming, by virtue of one's own labor, what is found, into what is rightfully the laborer.

<sup>19</sup>See, for example, Philip Alperson, "Improvisation" in *The Encyclopedia of Aesthetics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 478.

<sup>20</sup> Curtis Carter, "Improvisation in Dance," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 58, no. 2 (Spring 2000), 181.

<sup>21</sup> David Davies, *Art as Performance* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 225-226.

<sup>22</sup> In architecture there are many cases of nearly identical buildings. Contemporary developments set off by the first Levittown in 1948 may be one example; the McDonald's restaurants, another. These, however, are intentionally copied via the intermediary of an identical or similar plan and program.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 229. Emphasis added.

<sup>24</sup> Mark Wigley, "The Domestication of the House," in *Deconstruction and the Arts*, Peter Brunette and David Wills, eds (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 221.

<sup>25</sup> Raffi Khatchadourian, "In the Picture," *The New Yorker Magazine*, 28 November, 2011, p. 56.

<sup>26</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Signet Books, 1952), 10.

<sup>27</sup> Neuwirth, 306.

<sup>28</sup> Woods, xviii.

<sup>29</sup> Philip Johnson and Mark Wigley, *Deconstructivist Architecture* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1988), 18.

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