The logic of informality: Pattern and process in a São Paulo favela

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ABSTRACT

Informality is thought of as a spontaneous, uncontrolled response to the mass urbanization rapidly sweeping the globe. Much of the new housing stock in the developing world is being provided for by the informal sector. Rather than treat this as an unplanned, liminal spatial practice, we should instead seek to better theorize and describe its socio-spatial logic. We propose that informal settlements do exhibit a complex logic that is grounded in practice, which we refer to as a logic of enactment. We develop a set of propositions for characterizing these logics, building on a Bourdieusian framework, and test these in Guapira II, a favela in São Paulo. Informal logic, as manifested in informal settlements, is seen to exhibit the characteristics of sociopoiesis and contextuality, constituting a complex rationality. The nature of design in the informal is a relational one.

1. Introduction

The logic of modernity, spatially expressed, is not simply a functionalist one. As importantly, it is seen in the strength of its forms and aesthetics, such as the strong, codified templates that guide design. Whether in the grand narrative of Niemeyer and Costa's albatross in flight imposed upon Brasilia or the stylistic palette of New Urbanism's form-based codes or metallic undulations of Gehry's avant-garde museums, the modern is realized as the logic of the formal. As text, their messages are eminently legible (Donald, 1992; Frisby, 1997).

In reaction to the formal universalism of urban planning and design, there has been a turn toward contextualism (Nesbitt, 1996). Rather than imposing the will (and logic) of the power-wielding subject (the developer, the state, etc.) upon the landscape, some seek to allow emergent phenomena of place to express themselves (Madanipour, 2006). Contextualism, as a design philosophy, mimics one's surroundings by incorporating patterns, shapes, and material congruent with the local context (Lejano, 2006). We still see form, even legible pattern, but in a way that is visibly less the artifice of the subject than the borrowing of patterns found in a place. There can be codification, too, but often incomplete, its logic not rendered *a priori* but negotiated. As will be discussed, whatever the nature of design is, in these informal settlements, it is a relational, as opposed to strongly rational, one (Lejano et al., 2018).

The question before us is what notion(s) of design stands opposed to the formal (even modern)? In a word, what is the *logic* of the informal? How are these logics institutionalized in the absence of codification?

Urban informal housing is conventionally recognized as 'illicit' space – i.e., that which spills out from the confines of the regulated, planned urban order. However, as Chiodelli and Moroni suggest, informal housing may more properly be understood as nomotropism, which is a reasonable response to a system of rules (2014). In fact, as de Souza argues vis-à-vis the favelas of Brazil, efforts to legalize these settlements may actually diminish their effectiveness as housing solutions (2001). What this suggests is a renewed effort to reconceptualize informal urban space as an institution in itself.

We discuss some of the extensive literature on informal housing and note directions for exploration, identifying the need for new descriptives to characterize urban informality. We begin conceptualizing informality and contextuality in ways that allow deeper analysis – i.e., characterizing it as a sociopoietic system, which we discuss below. In this, we are guided by concepts from Bourdieusian theory (Bourdieu, 1977, 1990). This leads us to several claims about key characteristics of the logic of informality, as we discuss in the next section.

We test these claims against an archetypal example of informality: the favelas of Brazil, which comprise the type of residential settlement characterized by the highest degree of informality (Lara, 2010).[1] We use the case of one São Paulo favela, Guapira II, without supposing that this case is at all representative of the bewildering array of informality to be found around the world, or even favelas in Brazil. The main intent of the research is not to survey the voluminous literature on informal settlements or even on favelas in Brazil, but that of developing a new approach to theorizing and describing urban informality.

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[1] In contrast, loteamentos, while also exhibiting informality in form and building construction, differ from favelas in that loteamento residents have formal property rights.

2. Assessing the literature on informal settlements

The literature on informal settlements has evolved along with the unprecedented growth of this mode of housing. Much of the work in the 1950s and 1960s associated urban informal settlements with urban blight and discussed approaches to eliminating them (Nijhoff, 1968). The prevailing view of informal settlers was that of marginalization and inability to integrate into the urban. Since then, the unrelenting growth of informal settlements in major cities led to growing acknowledgement, among practitioners and researchers, of their undeniable resilience. By the 1970s and 1980s, the literature began questioning the marginalization assumption and, moreover, worked out how they were, in fact, an outcome of the logic and dynamic of modern urban management (Perlman, 1979; Castells, 1983). By 1990, the majority of urban residents in various Latin American countries would be living in informal settlements – e.g., Guatemala (66%), Nicaragua (81%), Peru (60%) (Irazabal, 2009; U.N., 2008). By then, informal settlements, and informality in general, would come to be recognized as phenomena attendant to a globalizing world economy with an increasingly flexible production of goods and services (Satterthwaite, 1999). It is during this time that effort began at regularization of these settlements and according them formal property rights (e.g., Kombe and Kreibich, 2000).

With the realization that informality had become a permanent feature of urbanization, the development literature focused on upgrading – i.e., improving building stock and providing improved services (e.g., Van Horen, 2000). Theorizing about informality branched off in various directions. Some of the literature worked out how urban informality was an expression of "the uneven nature of capitalist development" (Rakowski, 1994: 37). Given the tremendous rise of urban influx, along with the hollowing out of the state, urban informality was increasingly viewed as inevitable, even necessary (Ferguson, 2007). It was part of the response of failing states toward rapid and sweeping urbanization and part of the political entanglements that characterize fractured institutions for urban governance (Gandy, 2006; Gilbert and De Jong, 2015).

Other literature began to valorize urban informality, viewing the informal economy and housing as part of a creative response to unmanaged urbanization (de Soto, 1990; Mitlin and Satterthwaite, 2004). Further legitimizing informal settlements, the literature proceeded to work out efficiencies and productivity to be found in them (Dowall, 1991). Part of the evolution in attitude toward urban informality may have also been a realization that communities often are able to "regularize" and build physical, social, and organizational assets over time (e.g., Moser, 2009).

Informal housing has become an acknowledged institution, as 30% of the world's population now live in informal settlements (Taylor, 2011; Davis, 2006). Thus, scholarship has begun to treat urban informality as a legitimate form of urbanization. Many recognize how the formal and informal are interdependent (e.g., Innes et al., 2007). The literature has begun analyzing the political economy of life in informal settlements (e.g., Bayat, 1997). It does not suffice to merely characterize informality in terms of the absence of property rights (though, see Webster et al., 2016 on gradations in systems of rights). Common to these treatments is an effort to weaken the hitherto strong dividing line between "formal" and "informal" (e.g., McFarlane, 2012) or "legitimate" and "subaltern" (Roy, 2011), perhaps even seeing in informal settlement an alternative/insurgent form of urbanism (Ballard, 2012; Vasuvedan, 2014), and decolonization (Safransky, 2016). In some cases, informality is revalorized and commodified for public consumption (as described in Linke, 2014). At any rate, our intellectual project involves legitimizing the forms and practices of informality which is conventionally hitherto ascribed as a merely anomalous occurrence in the otherwise hegemonic logic of "neoliberalized space" (Peck and Tickell, 2002).

A particularly interesting strand in the literature deals with the recognition that informal settlements, spatially and formally, arise from the nature of social relations in these communities (Wigle, 2010) and between these communities and the urban administrative state (van Gelder, 2013). As van Gelder describes it: "within informal settlements social practices give rise to normative orders that decouple from the official legal order" but sometimes, these "inventively copied official law whenever possible and convenient" (2013: 500). The working out of social relationships is also related to Roy and AlSayyad's point, that: "if formality operates through the fixing of value… informality operates through the constant negotiability of value" (2004: 5). There is increasing attention to the social dimension, as an underexplored dimension of informality – e.g., Cleaver's description of how bricolage replaces formal contracts (2002), or Simone's account of how transactions involve "exchanged glances and murmurs rather than documents" (Simone, 2008).

A long literature on informal settlements has noted the importance of social processes in these communities. For example, social capital is important in providing resources to build new homes and establish livelihoods (Grant, 2001; Goytia, 2013), but at times, can even be a deterrent to upward mobility (Perlman, 2004). The favela to be studied in this paper is not different in this regard.

While this literature works out how social phenomena and informal places are intertwined, it has not yet shown, in detail, the mechanisms behind these relationships. There is recent attention to understanding informal spaces as assemblages (e.g., McFarlane, 2011; Dovey, 2012; Grossmann and Haase, 2015), which posits, conceptually, that places emerge from the processes bringing together human and nonhuman factors in interacting ways. And parallel to this is growing interest in the morphology and physical forms of these settlements (Dovey and King, 2011; Lara, 2010; drawing from Deleuze and Guattari, [1980] 1987), which is beginning to integrate social and political process in explaining the rationality behind common building types (Kellett, 2005). But the connections between the social and material are not yet fully described in the literature. Simone, for example, describes the non-codified, emergent practices that characterize informal institutions in the city but not to the point of tracing material outcomes to them (Simone, 2008). Similarly, Wigle describes socio-economic structures in the informal community and how the latter produced an alternative site layout but did not trace specifics of the layout to social processes (Wigle, 2010).

In our work, we find promising insights by conceptualizing the relationship of physical pattern and social relationship as a dialectic. Moreover, we bring a particularly Bourdieusian lens to the study of urban informal housing, which the literature has hitherto employed to an appreciable extent.

3. Conceptual propositions

Building on the literature on the social dimensions of informality, we introduce several concepts that will be useful for investigating the informal. In Outline of a Theory of Practice, Pierre Bourdieu sketched a theory about the implicit rationalities behind the socio-spatial practices of everyday life (1977). Logics of practice are not synoptic, in the way that a planner might view the spatial configuration of a city from plan view or across a fifty-year time horizon. Instead, everyday logics emerge from planting one's feet on the ground and encounters with local context. These rationalities emerge, most immediately, from bodily orientation and experience. But they are also governed by the web of social relationships that constitute local context. The resulting patterns are sometimes never consciously manifested or verbally expressed, but emanate from the person's emplacement in a community's social and physical habitus, the latter term defined by Bourdieu as a system of "durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures… that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends…" (Bourdieu, 1990: 53) – in other words, an implicit logic that an individual acquires through physical engagement with place and socialization. One characteristic of the logic of practice,