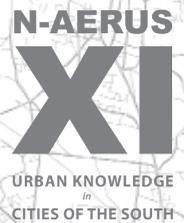


# Postcolonialising informality?



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## Abstract

Urban informality has been the subject of renewed attention in recent years, with a resurgence of interest in informal housing areas from architects and urbanists. A focus on informal settlements has, however, been criticised as reviving colonial hierarchies, characterising entire cities in terms of lack and rendering them perpetually inferior to cities in the West. Although work on urban poverty in Latin America has not generally engaged directly with postcolonial critiques, this paper identifies what may be called a postcolonial impulse at work in the recent literature on informal urbanisms in Latin America. This literature on new 'slum' urbanisms seeks to undermine modernist dichotomies such as formal/informal or centre/periphery. The paper argues that this critique overlooks key contributions of existing scholarship on urban Latin America and illustrates how recent work on the informal city and the discursive 'favela-isation' of the continent can perpetuate dualistic interpretations, entrenching stereotypes rather than disrupting them.

## Introduction

As Ananya Roy (2005, page 148) observes, "informality is back on the agenda of international development and urban planning". Hernando de Soto's arguments about formalizing informal property to combat poverty are one important strand in current debates (de Soto, 2000). De Soto is an economist whose work on informality dates from the 1980s, illustrating the observation by José Castillo (2001) that it was mainly social scientists who led work on informality for a couple of decades, after the earlier pre-eminence of architect John Turner. There is now, however, a resurgence of interest from planning and architecture. In 2008, for example, the *Harvard Design Magazine* produced a special issue asking "Can designers improve life in non-formal cities?". Editor William Saunders (2008, page 3) suggests that the topic reflects a renewed social and environmental activism by architects and urbanists. This article examines some of the recent work on informality in Latin America in the light of an emerging literature on postcolonial urban studies.

For some of those contributing to the postcolonial literature, a focus on informality is inherently suspect. Jennifer Robinson (2006, page 123) rejects "mega-city and developmentalist approaches [that] extend to the entire city the characterisation of those parts that are lacking in all sorts of facilities and services". Such partial visions, emphasising lack, classify cities in the global South as essentially inferior to those of the West. Depicting mega-cities as sites of "decline and despair" consolidates a hierarchy of difference between cities, with mega-cities as the binary counterpart to global cities, perpetuating "colonial paternalism" (page 5). To postcolonialise urban studies, by contrast, means understanding cities as ordinary rather than Other and developing "creative ways of thinking about connections across the diversity and complexity of city economies and city life" (page 126).

In a similar vein, Sarah Nuttall and Achille Mbembe (2005) criticise Michael Watts (2005, page 189) for depicting "the slum [as] the defining feature of contemporary African metropolises" and thereby denying the "citiness" of urban Africa (page 199). Vjayanathi Rao (2006, page 231) argues that the "slum" has come to serve as shorthand for a "teleology of dysfunction" in South/Asian cities. And Tom

Angotti (2006, page 962) lambasts Mike Davis's (2006) *Planet of Slums* for fomenting simplistic dualisms ignoring the multiple connections between formal and informal.

Other scholars see informality as an aspect of contemporary urban colonialism that merits critical engagement. Oren Yiftachel (2009, page 91) identifies the informality of marginalised groups as an "inverse colonialism", although this colonialism from below does not supersede an older form of colonial relations involving the expansion of powerful ethnic groups. The wealthy also transgress the law (page 91; Roy, 2009a) (a point illustrated in the contrasting images of informality in Mexico City shown in Figures 1 and 2). In this case, the results may be surreptitiously legitimised, while the informality of the poor is demonised (Yiftachel, 2009, pages 90-92). While Yiftachel talks of inverting colonialism, Felipe Hernández (2010, page 97) sees informal settlements, rather, as the materialisation of Homi Bhabha's (1994) Third Space: liminal spaces between first and third worlds that bears witness to the creativity of the urban poor. [Figures 1 and 2 about here]

Most geographical references within the emerging field of postcolonial urban studies are to South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. *Environment and Planning A* published a special issue on 'Ordinary spaces of urban modernity'—positioned "between postcolonialism and development" (Legg and McFarlane, 2008, page 6)—concentrating primarily on South Asia. *Public Culture* focused on Johannesburg in an attempt to "writ[e] the world from an African metropolis" (Mbembe and Nuttall, 2004, page 347); similar intentions informed a 2006 issue of *Urban Studies* dedicated to 'Urban culture and development: Starting with South Africa' (Robinson and Pieterse, 2006). A recent issue of *Planning Theory* focuses on informality in an effort to expand the geographical scope of theory (Roy, 2009a). The emphasis is again on South Asia and South Africa, albeit with the addition of an article on Brazil and one on Israel.

The marginalisation of Latin America is ironic, because, as Nezar AlSayyad and Ananya Roy (2004, page 1) acknowledge in their book on *Urban informality*, research on informal land and housing markets emerged chiefly from Latin America in the 1970s. The book seeks to create a dialogue between Latin America, South Asia and the Middle East, but scholarship linking informality and postcolonial perspectives in the wake of *Urban Informality* concentrates on the cities of former British colonies. It follows a pattern firmly established in broader postcolonial debates, the subject of concern to Latin American scholars who identify a "systematic exclusion of the region" (Morafía, Dussel and Jáuregui, 2008, page 5; Coronil, 1992, 2008; Mignolo, 2000). In architecture, Hernández (2002) has queried the relevance of postcolonial theories to Latin American cities, as they pay too little attention to diversity within experiences of colonialism.

If postcolonial theories do not translate easily into a Latin American idiom, it is not perhaps surprising that the literature on informality in Latin America does not by and large engage directly with postcolonial (urban) studies. It is nonetheless possible to discern what we may call a postcolonial impulse at play in recent work on the architecture of informality in the continent. In what follows I argue, however, that despite an avowed intent to challenge the exclusions of (in)formality, the result can, ironically, be to perpetuate them.

### **Informality as resistance**

One strand in the recent literature on informality in Latin America picks up on a notion of postcolonialism as cultural resistance—in the words of Jonathan Crush (1994 page 336), "the recovery of those hidden spaces occupied, and invested with their own meaning, by the colonial underclass".

An article on "the new slum urbanism" by Carlos Brillembourg (2004, page 81), for example, insists that "there is nothing informal about this new city"—the *barrios* of Caracas. That is, the *barrios* do not lack form. Their form should be understood, rather, as defying the forms of both the colonial city and the deluded utopia of modern urban planning. A combination of topography (steep and unstable slopes) and the labyrinthine structure of the *barrios* hide the poor from the agents of the state and protect them against "an oppressively axial colonial urbanism" (page

81). The morphology of the barrios thus “represents the anti-state ... Form follows the reversal of the colonial model towards an urban architecture of resistance and despair” (pages 80-81).

Brillembourg bases this reading on an assertion that animism is common in the barrios, with *curanderos* [folk healers] playing key roles in the communities. He links this assertion to Michael Taussig's (1980) work on commodity fetishism and devil worship in South America, which depicted sorcery as resistance to the culture of capitalism, a creative assertion of the human will. Taussig argued that Bolivian miners and Colombian plantation workers invoked the devil to secure production of tin or sugarcane, but Brillembourg links devil worship in the barrios to consumer commodities such as trainers or skateboards. Whereas witchcraft uses waste body products—hair, blood and urine—the “poor-devil urbanism” of the barrios uses the city's waste products, scrap from “the excesses of an inefficient and excessive capitalism” recycled in shacks. Building barrios, then, is a species of sorcery: “the devil is called upon to revenge the injustice of the poor, and human-made filth is the medium for this sorcery” (pages 80-81).

Brillembourg's article on Caracas appeared, along with one on ‘slums’ in India, in an issue of *Architectural Design* on ‘Extreme sites: the “greening” of brownfield’. Brownfield is described by editor Helen Castle (2004, page 4) as “explicitly other, contaminated and generally fouled up by humankind”. Most informal settlements do not, however, occupy brownfield sites (although they may occupy land that is vulnerable to pollution, flooding or other hazards)—so why include these articles on ‘slums’? Presumably because such areas have been “contaminated” by the existing land use: housing for the urban poor.

Although the guest editors of ‘Extreme sites’ assert that their contributors *challenge* the representation of brownfield sites as Other (Gans and Weisz 2004, page 6), contamination and waste are recurrent themes in the recent literature. They evoke beliefs about slums in nineteenth-century Britain. Alan Gilbert (2007) rightly deplores the return of the word ‘slum’ to the lexicon of urban planning, echoing Victorian notions of the supposed depravity of residents of these areas. But the conflation of the urban poor with their environment in Victorian Britain had a still more deeply pejorative aspect. The spatial pattern of disease was attributed to invisible substances produced by decaying organic matter, reaching dangerous levels in overcrowded areas (Driver, 1988), and the same word, “residuum”, was used to describe both the faecal matter constituting the sanitary problem *and* members of the lowest social classes (Himmelfarb, 1971, page 320). Echoes of this equation can be found in current discussions of informality, from Brillembourg's “human-made filth” and Davis's ironic redeployment of “residuum” (2006, page 22) to environmental commentator Stewart Brand's description of “squatter cities” as “*human* cesspools” (Brand, 2006, page 83; added emphasis).<sup>1</sup>

Social reformers were responsible for some of these associations in Victorian Britain, converting the poor into “slum-dwellers” subject to sanitary intervention (Gunn, 2006, page 712). Similarly, the contemporary use of such images to represent poverty need not signal hostility. Burian (2007, page 123) introduces an essay on Mexico City with a photograph of sewage flooding an informal settlement and a quote from Victor Hugo: “the sewer is the conscience of the city” (and Hugo too elided sewers and people: Wilson, 1998). In Kenya, a non-government organisation produces humorous posters featuring “flying toilets” —winged toilet bowls flying through the air, alluding to the disposal of plastic bags used for defecation—to promote the claims of Nairobi's urban poor to the infrastructure that would allow them to dispense with such makeshift solutions to their sanitary needs (Gendall, 2008). And in Caracas, as part of design practice Urban Think Tank's engagement with the barrios, artist Marjetica Potrč helped construct a sustainable dry toilet in the barrio of La Vega before turning it into an art exhibit in the USA and Europe (Potrč and Esakov, 2005; González, 2005).<sup>2</sup>

The management of defecation has also inspired critical reflections on new forms of urban citizenship or “deep democracy” (Appadurai 2001, pages 25, 37; McFarlane, 2004). These concern the ‘toilet festivals’ in which Mumbai's urban poor display public toilets they design and operate themselves to government or

international officials to encourage financial support for these initiatives. Appadurai celebrates the transgressive humour of such strategies, which he calls “the politics of shit”: a “politics of recognition from below [in which] the condition of poverty moves from abjection to subjectification” (Appadurai, 2001, page 37).

But is there not also a possibility that such celebrations reconstitute the links between poverty and filth, reinforcing a moral hierarchy between those with and without private sanitation? Middle-class Mumbai residents oppose the construction of public toilets in their area: “If the toilets are for the slum dwellers ... then they should be built in slums” (*Times of India*, November 23, 2002). The ability to maintain distance from one’s faeces can also be a marker of national as well as class distinctions, as suggested by Gay Hawkins’s (2004) comparison of the Mumbai toilet festivals and concerts protesting the faecal pollution of Bondi Beach in Sydney.

If celebrations of informality as resistance reinforce the stereotypical association of slum-dwellers and human [made] filth, then the new slum urbanism may perhaps not be quite so new after all.

### **Ambivalent dualisms**

Postcolonial theorists have added their voices to the critique of binary oppositions characterising Western thought. A postcolonial analysis of informality seeks to disrupt the formal/informal binary that reproduces at a different scale the dualistic division between global cities and mega-cities. Examples of the binary thinking about (in)formality described as “urban orientalism” by Angotti (2009) are not hard to find.<sup>3</sup> As Rebecca Biron (2005) has written of widely-held views of Mexico City (which she rejects):

For many, that city embodies two dichotomous ... worlds: on the one hand, a pre-modern, indigenous, informal, poverty-based squatter culture; and on the other hand, a hyper- or post-modern, multi-cultural, tele-connected, globalized or world city.

Biron summarises the distinction as “the sewer versus the metro” (added emphasis).

To challenge such binaries, Saskia Sassen (2005, page 84) looks to “a re-reading of the city through representations of its post-colonial relationship to topography”. Topography refers here to approaches that divide informal settlements from the rest of the city. Postcolonial theorists adopt the view that the ordinary city should be regarded, instead, “as a set of spaces where diverse ranges of relational webs coalesce, interconnect and fragment” (Amin and Graham, 1997, page 418). Such an approach recognises citizens’ potential for political, cultural and economic creativity and dynamism (Robinson, 2006; Sassen, 2005; Mehrotra, 2010; Hernández, 2010).

The need to overcome the “trauma” of the formal-informal binary features prominently in the case Jorge Mario Jáuregui (2004, page 125) makes for Rio’s Favela-Bairro upgrading programme, for which he was one of the architects. Erasure of that opposition has been described as central to his work (Machado, 2003, page 10). Jorge Fiori (2001, page 12) suggests that the programme may have helped to:

change the place of favelas in the imaginary of the city [by means of a] change in the boundaries between the formal and the informal, rather than extending the formal city and its regulations into the irregular spaces of ‘non-city’ ... Rather than an integration which becomes synonymous with homogenization, the challenge is to make a city of integrity that is multiple and diverse.

Paola Berenstein Jacques (2001a, pages 152, 170) expresses a similar thought when she argues that Rio’s favelas should be upgraded *without* becoming “bairros” (“ordinary popular neighbourhoods”).<sup>4</sup> “Boring ordinary neighbourhoods [*d’ennuyeux quartiers ordinaires*]” lack their social, cultural and aesthetic distinctiveness (Berenstein

Jacques, 2002, page 196). Favelas are “in between” spaces, and, being neither here nor there, are in constant movement toward the as-yet unknown (pages 32-33). They are about shelter, movement and change, rather than dwelling and permanence: the provisional, the ephemeral, rather than the fixed and durable (pages 20, 57, 79, 196). Similarly, Rahul Mehrotra (2010, pages xi-xii) writes of the informal or “kinetic” city as “in constant motion”, “temporary in nature” and characterised by “flow, instability and indeterminacy”. Other authors adopt the notion of “smooth” space from Deleuze and Guattari (1987) to link the informal city to the unscripted use of space by nomadic groups, whose journeyings count for more than the points of reference they connect (Jáurgeui, 2003, 2010; Hernández and Kellett, 2010).

In their efforts to understand the structure of the city without resorting to binaries, Berenstein Jacques (2002) and Jáurgeui (2004, 2010) also adopt the concept of rhizome from Deleuze and Guattari (1987, pages 7-13). Unlike a tree, in which everything is structured through the single trunk, a rhizome can grow a shoot at any point, extending along “lines of flight” to connect a multiple, decentralised, range of locations. It is “a type of structure that ... refuses the notion of hierarchical order, that possesses a patchwork quality, a radical heterogeneity” (Jáurgeui, 2004, page 126; Berenstein Jacques, 2002, pages 181-192).

In *Informal City*, Urban Think Tank partners Alfredo Brillembourg and Hubert Klumpner (2005b, page 22) suggest that understanding the expansion of Caracas as “rhizome-like” helps overcome the inadequacy of binary thinking in relation to urban forms they describe as “newly emerging”. They are not alone in writing about informality as though it were something new.<sup>5</sup> In theorising from the global South, authors are increasingly describing informality as where the world is heading, directly relevant to *all* cities: “a new paradigm for understanding urban culture” (AlSayyad, 2004, page 9; Brillembourg and Klumpner, 2005d; Cavalcanti, 2008; Jaguaribe and Hetherington, 2004; Mehrotra, 2010; Roy 2009b). For Daniela Fabricius (2008, page 16), informality speaks to “the urbanity that takes place between the ruins of the Modernist city and the entropic expanses of the postmodern city”.

This is a heavy theoretical responsibility for the residents of informal settlements to shoulder. In addition, as Robinson (2006, page 90) observes, “inverting the problematic of spatialised temporalities associated with ethnocentric views of modernity does little to place diverse cities in relations of temporal equivalence” (Robinson, 2006, page 90). The denial of coevalness is a key charge levelled against Eurocentric epistemologies by postcolonial critics (Mignolo, 2000, pages 120, 285, citing Fabian, 1983).

But I also wonder whether the images of informality that are being promoted can live up to these high expectations.

Two cities dominate the recent literature: Rio de Janeiro and Caracas. Although Brillembourg and Klumpner (2005b, page 22) propose Caracas as *the* informal city, Rio is surely the underlying model. We might even suggest that one of the reasons Caracas is receiving so much attention is that the location of the barrios on steep hillsides, their origin in invasions and their occasional proximity to wealthy neighbourhoods means they can resemble Rio’s favelas. The extraordinary topography of Rio means that adjacent extremes of wealth and poverty are separated vertically in what Fabricius (2008, page 11) describes as a “topographic apartheid”. Perhaps the stop-start character of the built-up area interrupted by granite monoliths, and the patchwork of rich and poor neighbourhoods, remind observers of the rhizome’s capacity to grow again if it is broken. Certainly, the city’s favelas are described, explicitly or implicitly, in organic terms: they spring up like plants growing in the middle of the street, creating a “plant-city” (Berenstein Jacques, 2001b, page 29; Fabricius, 2008; Perlman, 2009). The parallel is encouraged by the derivation of the word favela from a species of shrub (Berenstein Jacques, 2001a, page 31).

Favelas have, then, become “iconic images of informal urbanity” (Fabricius, 2008, page 5). There is a fascination with characteristic aspects of favela cityscapes: V-shaped buildings occupying the angle where alleys snaking up a hillside turn back on themselves; narrow stairways climbing steep hills; a mass of houses chaotically stacked on top of one another. Such images frequently appear on book covers, and

they are sometimes deployed with little concern for how well they represent informality in a particular city.

Nor is it simply a question of images: the word “favela” is being used to designate informal settlement throughout Latin America, even where the term has no local currency. The informal production of urban space in the continent has been called *favelización* (Fernandes and Smolka, 2004, page 12). Teddy Cruz (2007, 2008) uses the phrase “favela-like” of informal neighbourhoods in Tijuana, Mexico, and informal settlements in Bogotá, too, are being described as favelas (Beardsley, 2008b, page 35).

The discursive “favela-isation” of Latin America is misleading and problematic. The practice implies a homogeneity that not even Rio’s favelas possess. Not all of them are located on hillsides and some have a more regular morphology. Not all have their origins in squatting: there are areas created to re-house evicted squatters that have themselves become favelas. Favelas thus display considerable diversity (Fessler Vaz and Berenstein Jacques, 2004; Valladares, 2005). What is more, to identify informal settlements with favelas fails to recognise that most Brazilian “slum dwellers’ ... are not squatters and do not live in *favelas*” (Holston and Caldeira, 2008, page 22; Perlman, 2009). Instead, they purchase their housing plots in illegal subdivisions, *loteamentos clandestinos*, which receive hardly a mention in most of the recent literature.

The belief that informal means “unplanned” or spontaneous is one of the foremost myths about urban informality (Castillo, 2001, page 105).<sup>6</sup> Whether incremental or organised, squatting constitutes only one mode of irregular land acquisition, and not necessarily the most important. Castillo (2001) uses two aerial photographs of Ciudad Netzahualcóyotl in Mexico City, taken seventeen years apart, to illustrate how evidently *planned* the area was, as witnessed by its regular layout and empty properties indicating a steady development process not requiring immediate occupation to secure possession. Even squatter settlements do not necessarily display the structure generally ascribed to favelas. As land invasions are tolerated in Santa Marta, Colombia, squatters have subdivided one settlement into equal-sized plots on a regular grid plan (Kellest and Napier, 1995). Ironically, just two issues after Carlos Brillembourg’s condemnation of the “oppressively axial urbanism” of colonial city planning, *Architectural Design* also published photos of the first invasions in Villa Maria El Triunfo, Lima, showing that their layout “repeat[s] the exact urban pattern of the Spanish colonial city” (Golda-Pongratz, 2004, page 39).

The habit of describing informal settlements as favelas promotes a stereotype of a labyrinthine urban structure hindering upgrading. Taking Rio as the yardstick, moreover, is likely to cement rather than subvert binary representations of formal and informal, given that the contrast between *morro* (hill, meaning favela) and *asfalto* (paving) is so dramatic there. While the dividing line is clear in Rio (Perlman, 2009, page 30), informal settlements elsewhere can evolve into neighbourhoods that are virtually indistinguishable from adjacent areas. This is true in Mexico City, for example (as demonstrated by Ribbeck and Padilla, 2002), and also in Guadalajara, where the extension of the existing street grid into the east of the city and after-the-fact servicing of irregular subdivisions produced a continuous urban fabric without obvious boundaries between “formal” and “informal” (Varley, 1989).

To build on dualisms such as *morro/asfalto*, even as a basis for a progressive urbanism challenging those divisions, is, I suggest, problematic. It seems that, despite an a priori commitment to disrupting them, current discussions of informality continue to shore up conceptual dichotomies. Conjuring up the image of a rhizome or a nomadic caravan is not enough to avoid their binary entrapments.

One example of how the literature reifies the distinction between formal and informal is provided by its repeated reference to the omission of informal settlements from city maps (Berenstein Jacques, 2002; Brillembourg and Klumpner, 2005a; Fabricius, 2008; Gouverneur and Grauer 2008; Madrazo and Chevtchenko, 2005; Mossop, 2003; Terry, 2001). Perhaps this too is a gesture towards postcolonialism, invoking the denial of citizenship to their populations (although mapping is itself often regarded as a colonialist practice). Jáuregui (2004, page 130) goes further:

these sectors of the urban fabric, that often go unrecorded in official cadastral

maps, represent the 'noir' image of society [*la imagen 'noire' de la sociedad*]: what no-one wishes to know about; non-places, spaces in-between, 'dead time' in journeys across the city.

Given, however, that Rio's black population is over-represented in these areas, the idea of the favelas as the "noir" image of society also speaks to other exclusions. An attempt to expose the multiple exclusions to which residents are subjected seems rather to entrench distinctions between a mobile and privileged Self journeying across the city and the Other occupying the non-places of urban identity.

Such framings reinforce constructions of informality as the "negative" pole of the city. Informal settlements are worlds apart, "with their own 'laws' and 'codes'" (Jáuregui, 2004, page 130; Gouverneur and Grauer, 2008; Berenstein Jacques, 2001b). At times such references seem to draw on a (mis)reading of Boaventura de Sousa Santos's arguments about legal pluralism in Rio's favelas, although Santos (1977, page 89) observed that the legal order of the favelas and official law are "culturally homogeneous". At others they evoke criminal 'honour codes' linked to drugs, gangs, or illegal betting (Jáuregui, 2003; Brillembourg, 2004, 2006; Bancelhon and Padrón, 2005). As Sabine Bitter and Helmut Weber (2005, page 115) observe, informality is depicted as dangerously dark and other. Carlos Brillembourg (2006, page 28) describes the barrios of Caracas as "a parallel city that cannot participate and does not share the same values". They are populated by "the rural poor, whose way of life and cultural framework are antithetical to urbanity" (Brillembourg and Klumpner, 2005b, page 21).

The polarity can be reversed, endowing the residents with moral superiority and rendering the barrio "heroic in its insistence [on] the everyday and the informal" (Bitter and Weber, 2005, page 115). The population has a strong sense of community and citizenship emerges from an ideal of collectivity (ibid.; Beardsley, 2008a; Battle, Manrique, Perez and Plaza, 2005; Golda-Pongratz, 2004; Gouverneur and Grauer, 1999). The strength of community is evident in the vitality of street life and public rituals such as religious festivals—and, of course, samba. "Heroic" views celebrate informality, as we have seen, as resistance (Brillembourg, 2004; Pascolo, 2001), as spontaneity and an absence of bourgeois calculation, or as the Dionysian, transgressive, spirit of Carnival (Berenstein Jacques, 2001a, 2002). For others, it can be a kind of architectural existentialism:

improvisation—passion for building, adapting and living ... an unrestrained 'do-it-yourself' approach to life. Merely to exist is not enough—one must be shown to have existed by making a lasting mark on the city (Brillembourg and Klumpner, 2005b, page 21).

The latest addition to these heroic narratives of informality is a celebration of informal settlements' ecological virtues. They have smaller environmental footprints than other urban areas because of high densities and low rates of car ownership (Beardsley and Werthmann, 2008; Brand, 2006). The barrios of Caracas are a "great recycling machine" (Brillembourg and Klumpner, 2005c, page 223; Brillembourg, 2004). Architect Teddy Cruz (2007) is renowned for housing projects inspired by the recycling in Tijuana of garage doors, tyres and even whole bungalows from San Diego (a wonderful example of hybridity that almost single-handedly guarantees Tijuana a place in the literature). This emphasis on ecology and recycling is the basis of suggestions that informal settlements have something to teach everyone, as prototypes for a new *environmental* culture (Brillembourg and Klumpner, 2005a, page 250; Brand, 2006; Mehrotra, 2010).

Reversing the valorisation of a dualism does not, however, undermine the binary opposition. Idealising the residents of informal settlements does not produce a postcolonial reading of the city. The claim to transcend dichotomous readings opposing informal settlements to the rest of the city—replacing them with a vision of informality as "inexorably interwoven with the city as a whole" (Fiori and Brandão, 2010, page 188)—founders as observers are drawn back to 'slums' as the paradigmatic expression of urban informality.<sup>7</sup> Rather than integrating, enriching and multiplying

our urban imaginaries, current efforts to re-envisage the 'informal city' run the risk identified by Robinson (2006), of characterising entire cities in terms of their most disadvantaged parts.

### **Conclusion: the uses of informality**

Why does all this matter?

First, because by and large (and with some notable exceptions, such as Ribbeck and Padilla, 2002), recent discussions of informality make little reference to the personal experience or views of residents, other than some community leaders. As a result, they are in danger of promoting an aestheticisation of poverty (Jones, 2010; Roy, 2004). A re-engagement with informality as architecture may have been overdue, but it should be as an ally rather than an alternative to ethnographic inquiry .

Second—and, I believe, as a consequence of the failure to spend time talking with residents—the literature runs the risk of giving new life to old stereotypes of 'slum-dwellers'. Some of these are demeaning stereotypes: an ironic outcome for projects that clearly set out with progressive intentions. References to parallel worlds or to rural migrants being inherently unable or unwilling to share urban values reintroduce derogatory beliefs about marginality discredited years ago by Janice Perlman's classic study of Rio, the very place now at the centre of the 'favela-isation' of Latin American informality (Perlman, 1976).<sup>8</sup> They offer a curious basis on which to combat the formal-informal binary or to postcolonialise urban studies. A fascination with informal settlements as a dark and dangerous Other surely epitomises the "noir futuristic urban genre of decline and despair" criticised by Robinson (2006, page 5).

Third, I worry that the images of informality that dominate some of the recent architectural and planning literature could encourage interpretations and interventions that are at odds with the stated aim of humanising cities.

One example concerns the argument about informal settlements recycling waste materials. In many cases, in Latin America, this is true only of structures erected by the newest or poorest residents, who either need to put up a shack immediately to guarantee their occupancy of a plot or cannot afford more permanent materials. Older houses are more likely to be built of materials that are purchased rather than salvaged. Consequently, the viability of proposals to build housing in Tijuana using recycled materials is questioned by Tito Alegría (2008, page 66), on the grounds that most families prefer to save and invest in more durable materials. Should they be asked to give up these aspirations?

Similarly, extolling low energy use by the residents of informal settlements runs the risk of essentialising poverty and creating a new kind of 'noble savage'. The question is: what policies might follow? Brillembourg and Klumpner (2005a, page 255), for instance, advocate resisting efforts to make the barrios more accessible to motor vehicles, on the grounds of ecology, social cohesion and residents' physical fitness. Although funiculars and cable cars are being built to serve informal settlements in a number of cities, however, it seems highly unlikely that they would be able to meet all the residents' transport needs.

A more serious risk concerns the potential denial of legitimacy to residents' aspirations to permanence. In current theoretical debates—both in relation to informality and more broadly—dwelling is a suspect value, while mobility and transience are celebrated. Even when the authors whose work has been discussed in this article stress that the impermanence of informality is a *permanent* impermanence, it is the *impermanence* they celebrate, because mobility and fluidity challenge the fixity of binary oppositions. Is there no danger that celebration of the precarious, improvised, ephemeral, nature of informal settlements, or of their resemblance to rhizomes, with the ability to grow again (elsewhere) if disrupted, could relegitimise hostile responses by city authorities—even eradication? Insisting on the temporary nature of informal uses of urban space might provoke the response that there is therefore little reason to oppose proposals to remove or relocate the users. Although Berenstein Jacques (2001b, page 28) believes that "[t]oday, the right to urbanization is unquestionable", that is by no means always the case, in Brazil or elsewhere in Latin America

(Manrique, 2009). The massive expansion of formal housing for salaried workers in Mexico's cities, for example, is celebrated in some quarters as a sign of triumphant modernisation, leading Priscilla Connolly (2008, page 162) to suggest that there has been a corresponding "demonisation of informality" in recent years.

Even if eviction is kept off the agenda, what kinds of intervention are encouraged by the visions of informality currently in vogue? A discussion of favela design and upgrading held at London's Architectural Association led one participant to bemoan the fact that "the introduction of ... infrastructure was seen by many as a form of colonization" (Terry, 2006, page 26). Is this where a concern to postcolonialise informality leads us?

## Notes

1 Since a cesspool is an artefact, the adjective 'human' is superfluous if what is intended is to stress the poor environmental conditions of an area lacking adequate means of sewage disposal.

2 For Julieta González (2005, page 45), these exhibits raise questions about "art's involvement in the politics of the informal and its temptation to fall into facile manipulations of the plight of the oppressed in the sheltered space of the museum" (see also Jones, 2010).

3 In earlier work I have tried to show empirically how unstable the binary legal/illegal—a variant of formal/informal—is in urban Mexico (Varley, 2002).

4 All translations by author.

5 Jáuregui (2010, pages 10-11) attributes tensions between formal and informal urbanisation to the financial globalisation and technological change of the past thirty years.

6 The idea that informality might mean 'beyond the purview of the state' in Latin America was shown to be false two decades ago by authors such as Alan Gilbert and Peter Ward (1985).

7 For example, Mehrotra's (2007) concepts of the "kinetic" and "static" city (the city of formal architecture) refer to the city as a whole, and the former includes informal vendors and the makeshift structures they construct in formal areas; but the contrast between 'slums' and modernist office blocks is used to exemplify the two cities' co-existence in urban India (page 343).

8 Licia Valladares (2005) notes that other authors anticipated Perlman's arguments about marginality: Anthony Leeds, for example, addressed "the myth of urban rurality" in the 1960s (Leeds and Leeds, 1978). While Perlman (2009, pages 164-165) talks about a transformation from the "myth" to the "reality of marginality", she is referring to social exclusion rather than any incompatibility between the values of favela residents and city life.

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Figure 1: Urban informality in Mexico City—I

Source: author's photograph

An area of low-income housing in the west of the city in the 1980s. The area was developed by the illegal subdivision and sale in the 1960s of ejido land (granted to rural communities in Mexico's agrarian reform).

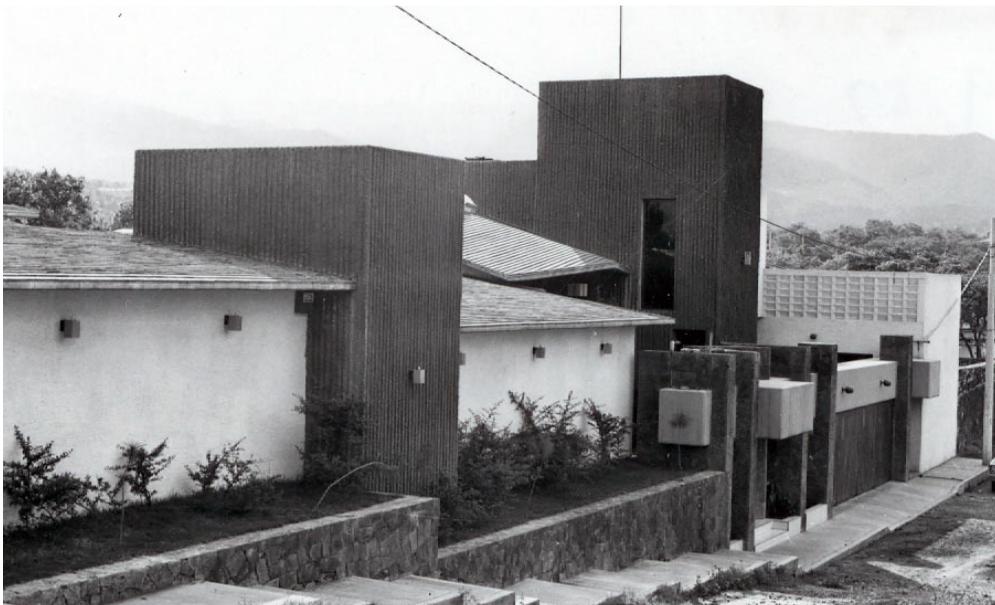


Figure 2: Urban informality in Mexico City—II

Source: author's photograph

Housing in the south of the Federal District in the 1980s. The area was developed in the 1970s by the illegal subdivision and sale of ejido land. Residents included a Supreme Court judge and a former Mayor of the Federal District, whose property occupied an entire block. Streets were unpaved and the area was not connected to the city's sewage network, although residents did have water and electricity.

