The City is Built: The Politics of Informality

When we arrived at the site, the bus was too big.

The roads were narrow and the electric wires were strung too low for the bus to get through. Residents lifted the wires up just high enough to drive under and up the hill, climbing clumsily past dozens of homes. We were conducting fieldwork at an occupation in São Paulo, and the first task was to chat with the clients: an association of occupation residents.

An occupation is an informal settlement, often referred to as a slum. This particular occupation is a peripheral community of about 800 families. According to residents, the land was occupied three years ago by word of mouth, *literally overnight*. Before, the land stood vacant, a dumping ground for stolen cars and dead bodies.

Families here live in self-built shacks. Municipal services, such as electricity, sewerage, water, and trash are non-existent. Residents receive electricity and water *gato*, meaning the community is illegally connected to some services via the neighboring municipality. Sewage goes untreated and is either contained in septic tanks or joins the visible runoff traveling downhill into the creekbed. Residents carry their trash to dumpsters in the municipalities, but dumping sites do exist within the occupation.

Our team's job was to help create a plan that would protect residents from eviction. The occupation sits atop natural springs that filter into the largest reservoir in the city, and for this reason, the site is considered a risk area. Residents must act quickly to improve the site's environmental conditions or face eviction. The community already relocated 144 homes along the creekbed, with plans to demolish the remaining homes next month.

"Esse é a realidade do Brasil," a resident remarked, pointing at the rubble. *This is the reality of Brazil.*

At the end of the first day, our goals were clear. We would move forward with our data collection, provide a framework for environmental education programming, address sewerage concerns, and so on.

Once we began our fieldwork, however, things became more complicated. We were contacted by the landowners who instructed our team to abandon research. We were told not to distribute surveys, not to disclose any proposals, etc. When we identified the resident association as our client, the landowners instructed us not to communicate with residents. In the eyes of property ownership, the resident association was illegitimate, and the community was silenced.

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Informality challenges contemporary understanding of the urban. For scholars trained in the North American context of planning, there is a struggle to understand and accept informality as a legitimate urban form. In our limitations of understanding how a city works in its diverse modes of urbanism, we fail to contribute any meaningful solutions.

Beyond the frameworks imagined by North American planners, there is also a failing to recognize the heavy position that global planning holds. Citizens living in informality face more than a lack of services and piles of trash; they live in a reality of volatility and oppression. Without thoughtful intervention, planners can create or exacerbate situations of conflict for vulnerable populations. Planning interventions that challenge the norms of urbanism have the potential to create change and further movements of social justice.

A Megacity

Urban planning as a discipline studies the interaction of people, capital, and space, declaring space the canvas of inequity. Henri Lefebvre (*The Production of Space*) writes: "Today, more than ever, the class struggle is inscribed in space."[1] Questions about property ownership and rights to the land have existed for centuries, and we are still asking these questions. In São Paulo, land speculation and a lack of rent control have driven 30% of the population onto informal settlements,[2] meaning 4 million people live in approximately 1,600 favelas and 1,100

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[1] Lefebvre, 183
[2] Leite

illegal settlements.[3] While land use remains a huge problem, Ananya Roy, professor at U-C Berkeley, argues that wealth distribution and access to property ownership are the true, underlying conflicts of informality.

In the past century, the accumulation of wealth under global capitalism contributed to a population growth by 27,000% in the São Paulo metro region.[4] Current global capitalism experiences the problem of an overaccumulation of capital. Robert Brenner (*The Boom and the Bubble*) describes this phenomenon as "a cascading and proliferating series of spatio-temporal fixes"[5] that has led to the "history of creative destruction…written into the evolution of the physical and social landscape of capitalism."[6]

The housing deficit in São Paulo is profound and unequally distributed, with the poorest representing 81.2% of deficits.[7] As an overaccumulation of capital pushes the poor outward in a departure from the city, urban voids appear at the center.[8] Buildings are abandoned; neighborhoods experience decline and gentrification. Perhaps most aggravating are investors sitting on vacant properties as profits climb, a practice without much government oversight. Today, the number of vacancies outnumbers the number of deficits.[9]

Towards Solutions

Planners work to contribute logic and order to spaces, thus, informality is intuitively paradoxical. However, planners should recognize the importance of planning in informal spaces. As Roy points out, informality is the result highly formal practices,[10] but because of the ingrained framework of formality, imagined solutions to problems of informality often require formalization via urban upgrades. These solutions are futile for two reasons.

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[3] Reali
[4] Leite
[5] Harvey, 68
[6] Harvey, 66
[7] A Tale of Two Cities, 116
[8] Leite
[9] A Tale of Two Cities, 116
[10] Roy, 150

First, formalization ignores the inherent dilemmas of informality. Integrating into formality may further displace residents as land becomes more expensive. Second, urban upgrading focuses on the beautification of space, rather than consulting the underlying needs of a community.[11]

For example, recent housing upgrades at the occupation site have had several pitfalls. In January, a transnational NGO provided kits for relocated families to build their new homes for $50 USD. Initially, the homes seemed successful. The structures were uniform with wooden floors, pitched roofs, and front doors that locked. Homes were lifted on stilts to avoid flooding during rain events.

According to the families interviewed, however, there are many problems with the structures. The houses get too hot in the day and too cold at night. There are no windows, so there is no sunlight or breeze. The roof leaks during the hard rain. The height of the lifted floors makes the families feel uneasy. Most importantly, residents voiced that the homes were just too small.

"The houses are great," said one resident, "if one person lives in them."

Many families modified the homes by building attachments with extra rooms. Some cut squares out of the walls to make windows. Others boarded up the underside of the structure to make it appear grounded.

Entrepreneurship

During our time in the city, we met with Pedro Jacobi (*Ambiente e Sociedade*) to discuss the occupation. When asking for insight regarding how informal settlements can manage waste, his response was consistent with many contemporary solutions: the responsibility must fall on the occupation individuals in implementing a waste management system. He also emphasized the development of partnerships with corporations or NGOs.

There is a push to use entrepreneurship as solutions to situations of poverty. Supporters of this philosophy argue that in times of necessity, residents will find *spontaneous and creative solutions* to problems.[12]

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[11] Roy, 150
[12] Hernando de Soto, 14

Entrepreneurship is truly solving some problems in the occupation. For example, a resident informally collects recyclables in the community and sells the collection to a larger service. Each day, the woman travels door-to-door to pick up the recycling, earning $10 USD per week.

There are limits to entrepreneurship in terms of both functionality and ethics. First, a single individual is responsible for waste management of 800 families. And while the practice is profitable for her, she plans to continue the operation only until she can start her food vending business, which she anticipates will be far more lucrative.

Secondly, neoliberal solutions test the moral integrity of the poor to an extent that is not seen of those living in formality. The government exists for those living in informality, too, if only the state would recognize it as legitimate.

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The majority of urban growth today occurs in developing countries, but urban theory literature reflects the developed world experience. The growing prevalence of informality should indicate that attempts to formalize or upgrade conditions of these spaces, or to rely on scenarios of entrepreneurship, will not lead to new or successful outcomes.

What is necessary is a shift in understanding how the city works, recognizing that the occupation and its varying levels of oppression and power are not exceptional but exemplary of informality. Roy writes: "informality provides an important lesson for planners in the tricky dilemmas of social justice."[13] Navigating how planners deal with this reality requires an exception of regularity[14] and breaking down of barriers to governance, policy, and scholarship.

Lefebvre writes: "There is a politics of space because space is political."[15] What planners do is political. It's not about green roofs, or bike lanes, or even housing and the environment. The city is built; the people are already here. How do we transform what already exists? This is the reality of informality, and the reality of what planners do.

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[13] Roy, 155
[14] Roy, 153
[15] Lefebvre, 183

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