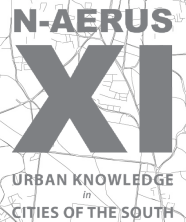


Popular Settlements, a 'New' (Old) Alternative Mode of Production of Space for Latin America? Reflections from Colombia's *Barrios*



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Introduction

This paper aims to explore urban knowledge on informal settlements produced recently and to some extent from the 'south'; in what it is called: 'new literature on informality'. Align with these ideas; this study argues that informal settlements can be seen as an alternative valid approach to urban space production, despite their limitations that cannot be overlooked. It aims to contribute to the debate for a different understanding of informal settlements, beyond marginalisation and poverty discourses. The paper is drawn from an ongoing PhD research titled: 'Production and Consumption of Open Spaces in Popular Settlements in Bogotá'.

In recent years, there has been a resurgence of attention among academics and practitioners alike on informal settlements. The Urban Think Tank book of Brillembourg *et al.* 'Informal City, the Caracas Case' (2005); the summer 2008 Harvard Design Magazine special issue called 'Can designers improve life in non-formal cities?' (2008); or the book 'Rethinking the Informal City', edited by Hernandez, Kellett and Allen (2010); are examples of this interest. However, these 'new' understandings that promote different and alternative ways to see informal settlements co-exist with 'old' ideas and perspectives. Among the 'old', which are very much current thinking affecting policies in Colombia, is the idea of the existence of two cities within the city: the formal and planned and the informal, unplanned and illegal which 'is the result of an urban speculative and chaotic process of peripheral territories, with no roads, transport and public services' (Rueda Garcia 2000: 2). In this regard, policies are mainly oriented (with interesting exceptions which aim to upgrade these areas) towards stopping these practices, eradicating these settlements whenever and wherever possible, and building new houses in other areas of the cities in which to relocate people. Needless to say, these policies have achieved limited results: 'Informal housing is shooting up, illegal dwellings increased by 17% in the last few years' ('*Vivienda informal esta "disparada", edificaciones ilegales subieron 17% en los últimos años*'. "El Tiempo", May 11th, 2010). The theme, therefore, not only figures importantly in the international arena nowadays, but also more and better understanding is needed in the Colombian context in approaching these settlements.

The 'old' views on informal settlements have limitations, but the 'new' ones have been challenged as well. Varley (2009) argues that this new literature on informal settlements may promote misconceptions that overlook social and urban problems of these settlements. Also this may give the wrong message to governments, as Torres and Castillo (2009) explain when they ask for structural changes in developmental policies in Colombia, because local and creative actions of people and organisations solely cannot deal with an extending and complex phenomenon like informal settlements. These concerns have to be taken into consideration, however as this 'new' literature argues, informality is not necessarily a problem, it can be an opportunity; or in other words, it can be seen as an alternative mode of production of space (Roy 2009: 826). Firstly, what these 'new' ideas on informality do is to acknowledge its existence as a valid approach to urban space production. Secondly, they challenge binary and marginalising discourses of formal/informal, legal/illegal, planned/unplanned and so on. They seek to see these settlements as they are, as part of cities, with problems,

opportunities and even with lessons to teach on integrity, inclusion and diversity (Fiori and Brandao 2010: 190). And the third contribution these ideas claim is that they recognise people behind the houses and the urban space. 'The informal sector has emerged as a complex system of social interactions' (Ramirez 2010: 138). Informal settlements are far more than houses and streets – they are people interacting with spaces. The dynamics of these settlements are much more than housing and urban facilities deficits, as is common currency in Colombian policies.

The paper is based on an ongoing research which draws on empirical data from 57 case studies of open space in the *barrios* of Bogotá collected between 2003 and 2007, and from them 6 cases which were further explored during the fieldwork undertaken in 2009. A qualitative methodology was employed, with a case study approach and a multi-method strategy: semi-structured interviews, observation, mapping, photography, photo elicitation and documentary sources. For the purpose of this paper, a discussion on literature about urban informality is carried out, having in the case studies a tacit reference for the arguments.

Scope and Definitions

Before the industrial revolution, self-help and self-building practices were the main ways people provided themselves with shelter. With technical developments and a growing economy, these practices were left to the more disadvantage people, especially in urban areas, and gradually lapsed from the formal procedures of the economy and the city. Urban expansion in the last five decades has contributed to the phenomenon of informal housing and informal settlements in general. In Latin America more than 75% of the population lived in cities in 2001 and over 30% (128 million people) of the continent's urban population were estimated to be living in conditions defined by United Nations Human Settlements as slums (UNCHS 2003: 14). Figures may increase in the future, when new urban populations will be requiring housing, public services, and social welfare. Slums are characterised by lack of basic services, substandard housing or illegal and inadequate building structures, overcrowding and high density, unhealthy living conditions and hazardous locations, insecure tenure, poverty and social exclusion, and minimum settlements size (UNCHS 2003).

Although these figures bring the significance of the subject into sharp relief, this paper is not about numbers or about defining these settlements solely in terms of what they lack, for the purposes of some kind of 'catch-up' approach, or as Robinson (2006: 11) characterises it: 'the imaginative straightjacket of imitative urbanism and the regulating fiction of catching up to the wealthier.' The UNCHS report (2003: 9) recognises there is not a universal characterisation of these settlements and 'today, the catch-all term "slum" is loose and deprecatory'. This paper is about understanding these settlements and the inter-relationships with the people, the local users, qualitatively. One of the first tasks, therefore, is to find an appropriate term to identify these settlements. In literature several can be found besides slums; e.g. shanty, squatter, irregular, marginal, spontaneous, un-planned, informal and so on (see more in Payne 1989 and; Gilbert 2007). Most of them are defined by the negative; however, the term 'informal' may also recognise the positive input of people's involvement in their production and transformation: 'Informal settlements are by definition unfinished projects in which the agency and creativity of the occupant-builders is central, in contrast to architect-produced architecture which emphasises the physical form of the buildings often at the expense of users.' (Kellett 2008: 11). The term informal, however, is not beyond debate, as it will be addressed in this paper.

In the light of what has been previously explained, what is an appropriate term for the subject of study avoiding binary and marginalising discourses? And including people explicitly in this identification? I am using popular settlements, which is a direct translation from Spanish, meaning the settlements of the people or of the '*pueblo*'. However, it may imply some kind of binary approach. In this regard, Postcolonial ideas

come to hand, when arguing that all cities – and parts of cities – should be called ‘ordinary’:

Rather than categorising and labelling cities as, for example, Western, Third World, developed, developing, world or global, I propose that we think about a world of ordinary cities, which are all dynamic and diverse, if conflicted, arenas for social and economic life (Robinson 2006: 1).

These settlements therefore could perhaps be called ‘ordinary’, with some extraordinary social, architectural and urban characteristics and challenges. This also helps to approach them as they are, avoiding the comparison with other parts of the city or with global ideas of informality. Although these issues of definition are important, they could cause confusion; and even though these settlements should be considered as ordinary in terms on how to approach them, they are non-ordinary in many aspects. In this regard, I will keep calling them popular settlements, but the ‘ordinariness’ of the approach is to be maintained. Nevertheless, ‘informal settlements’ and ‘barrios’ are going to be used interchangeably for literary convenience, and yet other characterisations whenever appropriate.

Historical and Traditional Perspectives

Literature on popular settlements started around the 1960s, when the issue was visible enough to draw attention. Encouraged by some government agencies and inspired by an economic model for industrial and urban development which then prevailed, cities in Latin America underwent rapid urbanisation, which at the beginning of the 1990s – from less than 40% in the 1950’s – represented 72% of the entire population (Gilbert 1994: 26). Rural-urban migration was at the centre of this growth, bringing massive numbers of people to cities which were not fully capable of accommodating these new dwellers, forcing them to look out for themselves and to find an alternative in popular settlements. These settlements were soon seen as a problem that needed to be solved by governments, both in terms of providing people with houses and with eradicating these marginal developments that started to appear in the inner and outer areas of cities. These settlements were illegal, and considered marginal and problematic. It was argued – and it is still the case for part of the elite groups in local contexts and for some public agencies around the world – that poor people would remain poor and marginal, that they are incapable by their own means of making any improvement in their lives and in their physical environments. Views that were propounded by Oscar Lewis as part of his work in Mexico, explaining them as the ‘culture of poverty’ and the ‘culture of marginality’ (Lewis 1963; 1966). This interpretation was, however, contested by the works of Mangin (1967) in Peru and Perlman in Brazil (1976), who refuted the ‘myths of marginality’ and common misconceptions.

But one of the major shifts in the approaches to the subject was consolidated by John Turner’s extensive inside research work in the *barriadas* (*barrios*) of Lima. He brought to light what poor people could do to organise and improve their houses and their living environments (Turner and Fichter 1972; Turner 1976). He suggested that informal settlements – far from being a problem – could be a solution to the question of housing and urban services; that people know best how to prioritise and use resources and meet their own needs. The idea of progressive development started to be documented here, and it is still one of the main issues in informal housing and settlements. Turner’s aided self-help ideas were promoted and funded in many countries during the 1970s and 1980s by the World Bank’s programme of sites and services; however, these views have had their opponents since the early beginnings. They are seen as a way for governments to evade their responsibilities for attacking structural social and economic problems which are at the centre of finding ‘real’ solutions to urban growth (Butterworth and Chance 1981). They are also seen as a way of exerting social control: ‘By and large, community participation has been used by governments as a means of legitimating the political system,’ (Gilbert and

Ward 1984: 780) and creating a 'dependent' relationship between the government and the poor communities, where the former 'tolerates' land occupations and informal upgrading to avoid confrontation and to make the city continue functioning (Gilbert, *et al.* 1982; Gilbert and Ward 1985).

In Colombia these perspectives are very much alive both in policy debate and in academic discussions, and alongside them people continue building and transforming their living environments largely by their own means. At the same time, new evidence and theoretical approaches have enriched the discussion and have shed light on the subject. These will be presented immediately after a brief discussion on perhaps the 'core' issue of popular settlements: informality.

Informality

Informality in Latin America is related to more than to settlements: for many it is a type of economic development of the region. But informal also applies to social and cultural practices, qualifying expressions and manifestations which differ from the mainstream. Informal is usually defined as the opposite of formal; in economic terms the formal is the capitalistic, neoliberal and global economy; in urban matters the formal is the planned, institutional and legal city; in cultural aspects the formal is arguably the established modern tradition. Furthermore, formal may imply legality while informal may imply illegality. However, things are more complicated, because it is often difficult to distinguish between what is legal and what is illegal, since it depends on the way the law is applied. A settlement may begin as 'illegal' or 'informal', but after some time it becomes legalised; indeed in some cases, it is even difficult to figure out if the settlement is legal or illegal, formal or informal. In addition, the size of the informal sector has increased rapidly to being as big as the formal or even bigger. Informal labour in Latin America in 2005 was 48.5% of the population (International Labour Organization, cited in Donovan 2008: 32); 'In some cities, these informal submarkets have grown so rapidly that they now represent a majority of the entire housing stock and are the most common means poorer households obtain residential land and housing.' (Payne 1989: 1) Nowadays, therefore, it could be difficult to distinguish the informal from the formal, and what is more, to be sure that the formal is the objective; in other words, that the tacit journey from the informal towards the formal is possible or desired.

The informal economic sector in Latin America can help us to understand aspects of informal settlements. For Hernando De Soto (1987), the informal economy is 'the other path' to economic development, a 'silent revolution' by poor people to obtain resources to make a living in the cities. The informal economy comprises a large range of activities and circumstances, and perhaps the only common aspect between them is that they are not registered with the government, and among other things, taxes are not paid (Ruiperez Palmero 2006). Milton Santos (2000) argues that there are two economic circuits, one superior or formal and one inferior or informal; however, both are interconnected, one depends on the other and vice-versa, in the sense that they are part of the same whole. The informal sector has low technology, low productivity, informal job engagement and self employment (The Regional Plan for Employment for Latin America and The Caribbean, cited in Ruiperez Palmero 2006: 65). Palma (1988) explains economic activities in the *barrios* as being 'the values, practices and culture which contribute to organise daily [economic] activities based on mutual help.' He calls these practices '*lo popular*' (the popular), which includes informality, family involvement, and individual, collective and community survival strategies. '*Lo popular*' also comprises organization and culture; for Palma '*lo popular*' and poverty are not necessarily the same, therefore it is not defined by what it lacks (*las carencias*), it is defined by the proposals, initiatives and contributions of the people. 'These [informal economic practices] have passed from being observed as transitional to a formalisation, to be seen as a valid and necessary alternative for the survival of many in the continent. It (this alternative) does not only comprise an economic type, but is

seen as a means of organization which includes also social and cultural dimensions.’ (Ruiperez Palmero 2006: 105) Popular settlements can also be understood as part of an informal sector or ‘*lo popular*,’ where people themselves look for better opportunities to improve their living conditions that they might not find within the formal sector of the economy. ‘*Lo popular*’ generates social and cultural dynamics that can be observed in the *barrios* and in the materiality of the built environment.

Arguably, the discussion of informality in relation to formality is at the centre of the current debate on informal settlements: Is informality close to illegal, and in those terms should the aim be to eradicate it, as traditional views imply? Or is informality an alternative, and in that regard should it be permitted and even promoted, as some alternative views suggest? Is informality a step on the tacit journey towards formality, as some traditional and current views argue? There are no answers to these questions, but elaborations on them which confirm the complexity of the subject. On the one hand, popular settlements are a consistent part of Latin American cities, not a marginal component but a central one, as different authors argue (Brillembourg, *et al.* 2005; Hernandez and Kellett 2010; Lima and Pallamin 2010). Furthermore, ‘Informal practices of urbanisation and urban life coexist with regulated urban development in a vast territory of contrasting physical, social and legal conditions.’ (Lima and Pallamin 2010: 39) But on the other hand, popular settlements are to a large extent defined by the comparison with the formal part of the city, implying the need to become formal one day (see for example Rueda Garcia 2000). The next section will discuss some other views which to some extent try to overcome this dualism, for example Kellett (1995: 27) argue that formal and informal are just two dimensions which are intrinsically interconnected: ‘... formality and informality from a variety of disciplines has demonstrated that the two sectors are far from independent and separate.’ In this regard, it can be argued that informal settlements are part of the city, not more or less than any other area: they are the city. This is in line with Robinson’s (2006) ideas of avoiding characterizations of urban areas in relation to others, and understanding them just as they are.

Present and Alternative Views

Informal settlement processes are now the dominant form of housing production in the rapidly expanding cities of Latin America. These cities are the sum of the continuing actions of low-income households each attempting to construct in physical terms their vision of the life and values to which they aspire. Such visions are ambitious and require the commitment of prodigious energy and creativity, leading in turn to a hybrid domestic architecture rich in meaning. Exploration of self-made environments can offer insights into the critical role of domestic architecture in consolidating and transforming economic relations and cultural identity. (Kellett 2002: 28)

Popular settlements not only make up a large portion of Latin American cities, but are also a dynamic part of them in physical, social and cultural terms. Fiori and Brandao (2010: 188) argue that ‘Urban informality is inexorably interwoven with the city as a whole – at all scales and levels – and has to be seen as another way of being in the city and constructing it.’ Informal settlements are also seen as innovative and creative: ‘Today we recognize the innovative genius of the urban poor in taking advantage of the specific cultural opportunities to survive and improve their living conditions.’ (AlSayyad 1993: 5) In terms of the built environment they are subject to different interpretations: ‘We do not believe “informal” means “lacking form”. It implies, for us, something that arises from within itself and its makers, whose form has not been recognised, but which is subject to rules and procedures potentially as specific and necessary as those that have governed official, formal city-making.’ (Brillembourg and Klumpner 2010: 120) Or in the association with vernacular settlements: ‘... spontaneous settlements, no less than the more widely admired traditional vernacular ones, can teach designers much.’ (Rapoport 1988: 72-73) in which design and construction procedures rooted

in local contexts can be similar to those found in traditional settlements (Oliver 2006). Today, informality is not only associated with poverty, marginality and deprivation; it is increasingly accepted as an alternative way of doing things. '*Lo popular*' is acknowledged as a strategy that informal settlers use to face their everyday economic realities, but is also referred to in relation to social and cultural aspects. Informality is not taken necessarily as a transitional step into formality, among other things because the border line between one and the other is increasingly becoming blurred. In other words, the relationship between formality and informality is very close. In economic terms, formal and informal activities are highly interconnected; and in urban aspects well consolidated popular settlements can eventually become indistinguishable from formal settlements, especially when upgrading programmes have taken place and land tenure regularisation has been implemented (Kellett 2005). For some, urban informality 'emerges under a paradigm of liberalization,' and can not be understood outside the context of globalization as an alternative way of thinking and performing: '... urban informality not only as a political economy but also as a way of life.' (AlSaiyad 2004: 26-27). In a similar respect Robinson (2006), in her call to postcolonialise urban studies, argues that we should get away from developmentalist approaches to understanding cities in the global south which imply a sort of catching-up notion with cities in the north, which may replicate the same informal/formal dualism explained earlier.

However, these views are not shared by everyone. For Varley (2009) this new literature on the 'new slum urbanism' may promote misleading images of popular settlements. She argues that '*favelas*' (*barrios*) have become an 'iconic image of informal urbanity,' an image that may make one forget what lies behind: the precariousness of housing and the struggle of the people. Or, it may even exalt the visual over everything else. A fascination that could also contribute to 'cement and universalise' the formal/informal dualism and its inconvenient associations of acceptability and good practice. For Viviescas *et al.* (1989) and Torres (2007) popular settlements are clearly a problem that need to be tackled from a top down approach, with structural political and economic changes. They acknowledge the great inventive and creativity of informal settlers to overcome their daily needs, but they believe it is the government which should provide proper housing and urban facilities for all, and not the people by themselves.

These critics pose valid concerns that need to be taken into consideration; however, to some extent they also confirm binary views of formal and informal, and highlight the complexity of the subject. Although research has suggested for years that formal and informal are interconnected (Bromley 1978; Moser 1994; Kellett 1995; Santos 2000; Ward 2004), there still exists a vivid dualism of discourse around the subject of the formal and the informal city, both in policymaking and academic symposia. This dualistic perception has reinforced ideas of considering 'informal' sectors as separate and inferior to 'formal' ones – in which life-chances are optimal – and as mere transitional stages on the way to the 'formal' city. These perceptions may have been influenced by other dichotomies with which informal settlements are also commonly seen: legal/illegal, traditional/modern and urban/and rural; with mostly quantitative measures against qualitative understandings. 'As a result, in housing and planning debates, policy makers have often failed to understand what life is like for the poor.' (Devas and Radoki cited in Lombard 2009: 8) In this regard, some of the alternative views of popular settlements aim to overcome these binary discourses by seeing them from a qualitative perspective and understanding them within their own context, 'emphasi[sing] the fluid dynamic nature of urban informal settlements, as constituted by social processes rather than static categorisations.' (Lombard 2009: 296).

Conclusions

This paper has aimed to contribute to the debate for a different understanding of popular settlements, beyond marginalisation and poverty discourses. Aligned with 'new' literature on informality, this study argues that popular settlements can be seen

as an alternative approach to urban space production.

Popular settlements are an overwhelming reality for most Latin American cities and the developing world; it has been for many the only way to acquire housing and urban facilities; and the results in terms of quantity and quality can be positively discussed. Popular settlements are the urban present and future for a large portion of the population; and they could be even the key for the 21st century and can give important lessons in terms of richness, inventiveness and achievement (Brillembourg *et al.* 2005). Popular settlements also provide an opportunity to understand different ways of seeing and thinking the city (Brillembourg *et al.* 2005; Roy 2009; Hernandez and Kellett 2010).

Popular settlements are very much about the people, and what they have done for their built environment and wellbeing. Poverty and struggle are part of the picture, and it is something that needs to be tackled more responsibly and successfully on the part of governmental bodies, but *barrios* are also full of possibilities and achievements: they especially involve people willing to take responsibilities for their own environments and lives. If they could have more resources and support, the achievements would be even greater and the people's struggle would be less.

Following Robinson (2006), these settlements should be seen as ordinary in order to avoid being labelled as different from others and marginalised. However, I firmly believe that these are extraordinary places, with truly unique people, and with exceptional architectural and urban characteristics from which much can be learned.

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