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Felipe Hernández, Peter Kellett and Lea K. Allen (eds.) (2012)

**Rethinking the Informal City: Critical Perspectives from Latin America**

Oxford and New York: Berghahn Books [Hardback 2009], 249 p.

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“People don’t know how to cook any more”, said a friend of mine some years ago in Mexico City, complaining about local food cultures. He was referring to the many small mobile eateries and grills you can find on every corner of the city that make cooking at home redundant. As the book on the informal city in Latin America shows, this meeting at lunchtime between the operators of mobile food stands and their customers (that range from bank assistants to plumbers) is only one example of the complementary relationship between the formality and informality of capitalism. The object of the book is ambitious, as the Indian architect and urban designer Rahul Mehrotra points out in his foreword (xi-xiv). On the one hand, we find a call for a redefinition of the term informal: going beyond the understanding of many social assistance programs of the informal city as the “city of the poor and marginalized” (xiii) or as something unstable, as informal housing is often stereotyped. On the other hand, the book reaches for an understanding of “the process of what makes up informal urbanism in the Latin American context” (xiii).

The book consists of two parts. The first part, “Critical perspectives”, is dedicated to research while the second part, “Critical practices”, subsumes participation in urban planning practices and the evaluation of public housing programs. The two parts are headed by an introduction of the editors who show that informality is no modern concept: the duality of formality and informality has existed throughout Latin American history. Hernández and Kellett also point to missing research and the stereotyping of the colonial city as a story of formal planning: “most Portuguese cities were mostly irregular in an attempt to respond to the topographical features of their location” (3). They also note that it was *conquista* that displaced indigenous settlements; changing them from formality to informality and to a life at the periphery. These forgotten formalities, as well as the informal and subtle changes in formal city architecture by black slaves, are still an understudied phenomenon.

The historical insights are not used to attempt a new definition or approach to the term, but rather to give a collection worthy of observation. The editors point out that

the term is quite new “in architecture as well as in other disciplines within the social sciences” (3). From the perspective of a political scientist dealing with regional and city governance in Latin America, this sounds a bit odd. This is especially so when one bears in mind elementary works on informal institutions and informality in city governance. A more interdisciplinary point of view certainly would enrich the concept.

The second chapter focuses on revisiting housing policies and planning in Brazil and Chile. With a broader perspective on Brazilian Cities Fernando Luiz Lara deals with the design of the informal. He identifies both formal and informal housing as being inspired by modernist design and shows that elements have disseminated to buildings of medium height as well as to favela buildings. However, the buildings have been variegated due to the availability of space, material and the moral concepts of the inhabitants.

The next two chapters analyze São Paulo and Brasilia. The contribution of Lima and Pallamin provides an actor centered perspective on housing in Downtown São Paulo. They show that the history of housing policy cannot be told without making reference to strong social movements. The contribution is also a good example of the shortcomings of decades of Brazilian social policy that just recently led to new protests.

Jirón's contribution offers a long-term perspective on planning in Santiago de Chile. Paola Jirón shows that from Allende through Pinochet, to contemporary housing

policies, a top-down style of policy making dominated. From an actor's perspective it can be read as a continuance of the contribution of Lima and Pallamin, as Jirón shows; in other words, how the dweller's movement soon got incorporated by an omnipotent state. Furthermore, it sheds light on the stereotyping that was prevalent in leftist housing policies: state-sponsored self-building programs were stopped by Allende as they were seen as discriminatory and occupying too much of the citizens' labor force. Instead, state-led building projects were launched to make housing a universal right. Jirón's contribution, as well as chapter 6 by Margarita Greene and Eduardo Rojas, also tell the story of relocating informality from the center to the periphery due to real-estate market development. This is a story of gentrification that is repeated day after day in many cities around the world, and that may be more hidden (and not with means of physical violence) but still with a social, and especially cultural, cleansing effect.

What are the implications for practical planning? The second part of the book is made up of three city cases (Caracas, Havana and Rio) and two overarching contributions on urbanity and exclusion (Jorge Mario Jáuregui) and an urban manifesto (Claudio Vekstein). Brillembourg and Klumpner treat this question with their Urban Think Tank by studying the example of Caracas. They introduce two modes of city planning: to accomplish best-case scenarios or to avoid worst-case scenarios. The authors recommend the second choice, as “considering ideal conditions is a waste of time; the point is to avoid catastrophe”

(129-130). They also recognize the formal logic of informal housing: “roofs in the barrio are designed to allow for another house to be erected on top, usually by the future inhabitants” (130). With their Urban Think Tank they develop examples, such as the vertical gym that enriches social life or the *palafitos*, a kind of variable stilts that protect houses from rain and make houses adaptable to the hilly ground. One could expect that the next chapter on *Barrios* in Havana by Ramírez shows a similar picture, as Cuban politics often served as a development foil for Venezuela under Chávez. But the contribution of Ramírez, based on analysis of six community projects shows a much richer picture. Despite being partly located at the margins of, or opposed to, the state; these projects could be carried out successfully. This also raises questions of regime type, policy-making and informality. These questions could potentially open an almost untouched field.

“The formal cannot survive without the informal” (228). This quote of Claudio Vekstein’s *City Manifesto* is the essence of why this book is a very worthy piece of city research and practice: it makes us rethink and remap concepts and categories of the city, its shape, its inhabitants and its governance.