

# The Uses of Informality

## Urban Development and Social Distinction in Mexico City

by  
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*“Urban informality” is a signifier that is disputed by real estate developers, politicians, and residents in undertaking strategies of social distinction and gaining particular political and economic benefits. Research in the western periphery of Mexico City distinguishes three cases of such use of informality. First, real estate developers employ informality as a threat to valorize and justify an enclosed “First World” lifestyle in gated communities. Second, informality motivates homeowners’ associations to take on a neighborhood-defending and state-monitoring role. Third, besides its function in reconstituting class frontiers, it serves as a referent for broader social mobilization against the perceived informality of the local elite. By facilitating social distinction, informality continues to marginalize communities as it influences planning decisions and access to land in urban Latin America.*

*La “informalidad urbana” es un significante que es cuestionado por las empresas de bienes raíces, los políticos y los residentes cuando se involucran en estrategias de distinción social para obtener determinados beneficios políticos y económicos. Nuestra investigación en la periferia occidental de la Ciudad de México establece tres casos de ese uso de la informalidad. Primero, las empresas inmobiliarias emplean la informalidad como una amenaza para valorizar y justificar un estilo de vida del mundo desarrollado en comunidades con acceso controlado. Segundo, la informalidad mueve a las asociaciones de dueños de casa a asumir el papel de defensores del vecindario y la función de vigilancia del estado. Tercero, además de reconstituir las fronteras de clase, también sirve como un referente para una movilidad social más amplia en contra de la presunta informalidad de la élite local. Al facilitar la distinción social, la informalidad continúa marginalizando comunidades ya que sigue influyendo en las decisiones sobre la planificación y el acceso a la tierra en el espacio urbano de América Latina.*

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“Welcome to the First World—Welcome to Bosque Real,” reads a sign at the entrance of the privately administered upper-class residential development in

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Mexico City's western-periphery Ciudad Bosque Real. Its developers, the investment groups FRISA and FUNTANET, obtained a construction permit only after Guillermo Espinoza Cruz—at the time a member of the Commission for the Economic Development of Huixquilucan and the candidate for mayor of the Partido de la Acción Nacional (National Action Party—PAN)—had agreed to modify the land development plan. Against the homeowners' associations' protests, his argument to justify his actions and gain votes deployed a term that has been central to the discussion of urbanization in Mexico. He stated that allowing increased density was preferable to risking the spread of "informal settlements" (*Reforma*, June 2, 2000; the translation of the Mexican newspaper extracts included here is ours). Having received this approval, the developers financially supported the city council in providing waste collectors and paint for the popular settlement adjacent to Lomas Country Club, their earlier-built gated community in the area. By improving the neighborhood's appearance, they hoped to modify its residents "culture of informality" and prevent them from littering or climbing over the walls (*Reforma*, July 14, 2000).

Originating in urban development discourse, the word "informality" has become part of everyday language as a signifier to establish social distinction and justify setting physical boundaries in the built environment. Although in a technical sense "informal urbanization" has been defined as the lack of property registration and the misuse of land-use prescriptions (Azuela, 2006), its persistent use in urban development discourse reproduces the dichotomy between "First World" and "Third World" cities and between orderly and chaotic urbanization (Robinson, 2002).

Transnational perspectives (Roy and AlSayyad, 2004) have shown that informality is not only a "generalized mode of space production" that goes beyond the narrow focus on the urban poor but also a method adopted by state authorities to legitimize the destruction of settlements (Yiftachel, 2009). Planning policies and documents frame particular strategies in the long-lasting negotiations between settler communities, political party representatives, and public institutions (Wigle, 2014). What is called the "informal city" (an area of uncontrolled settlement on territory that is not designated for building or for which settlers have no property titles) is a constitutive part of the "formal city" in political, economic, and legal terms (Connolly, 2009). Throughout its global itinerary as an analytic category (Varley, 2013), informality has become an issue of power, intrinsically tied to urban planning and central to the study of social inequality in struggles over the distribution of—and access to—land (Hernández, Kellet, and Allen, 2010). The close proximity of gated enclaves for the wealthiest and the so-called informal settlements housing the urban poor is a material expression of the sociopolitical inequalities that characterize today's urban Latin America (Irazábal, 2009).

This paper takes this relational and political understanding of informality farther. "Urban informality" in both planning practice and scholarship often refers to neighborhoods suffering from the lack of infrastructural services and the danger of eviction. Formalization is commonly understood as the provision of these services and the registration of property titles by the public authorities (Ward, 1998). Drawing on research on the western periphery of Mexico City, where gated communities, upper-middle-class neighborhoods, and workers'

districts coexist, this paper argues that informality is a signifier that serves to demarcate social distinction (Bourdieu, 1984). As such, it expresses one's own lifestyle and justifies one's own sociopolitical position. In social interaction, the "other" territory is signified as informal, lacking legal status, or deviating from the norm. Informality is thus used to distinguish the "other" and its territories from one's own "normality," that is, one's capacity to act within urban planning forms.

In order to account for the signifier's volatile and situational social meanings, this paper examines the uses of informality—the different senses of informality adopted by real estate developers, politicians, and residents to undertake strategies of social distinction and gain particular political and economic benefits. Informality as understood by architects, urban designers, planners, and economists (in reference to the urban living conditions of the poor segments of society) is seen as having marginalized communities in Latin America today. On the one hand, it has obscured the practices of real estate investors, the upper classes, and government institutions. On the other hand, its representation in planning policies has favored real estate developers in negotiations among public institutions, political party leaders, social movements, and "informal" residents. This paper highlights the importance of relating the political and symbolic dimensions of urban informality to understand how urban space is disputed in areas of metropolitan growth.

### THE USES OF INFORMALITY: PERFORMATIVE AND STRATEGIC DIMENSIONS

Since the 1970s the debate on informality has centered on housing and economic activity with an emphasis on the relationship between the two. Informal housing and economy have been seen as premodern forms characterizing the lifeworlds of the urban poor in developing countries. In line with modernization theory, Hernando de Soto (1989; 2000) has argued for the incorporation of these forms into the formal sphere. For him informality is the only accessible economic system for the poor, who are otherwise excluded through the solid bureaucratic regulatory framework of the state. Consequently, liberalization will allow both for the legal apartheid in which deprived "half-citizens" have no access to credit and for a larger tax base that will increase revenues.

In Latin America, the debate over informality in the 1970s focused on ways to integrate the "informal sector" into the formal economy (Lomnitz, 1988). The dualist perspective, which relied on a set of oppositions (Moser, 1994), has remained the dominant framework also for questions of urbanization. The self-employed migrant worker, living in a self-help-built neighborhood composed of unprotected and yet fairly organized structures, became the idealized figure of the poor in Latin American cities (Bromley, 1990; Castells and Portes, 1989). The discussion became more complex during the 1980s with the growing interest in structuralist perspectives (Rakowsky, 1994). From these perspectives, the informal sector is a consequence of structural inequalities that are inherent in global capitalism. Informality is the urban marginalized populations' response to exclusion from capitalist accumulation and a survival strategy.

In line with the Chicago School (Park, Burgess, and McKenzie, 1925), the anthropological and sociological approaches have assumed a “culture of poverty” approach (Abrams, 1964; Lewis, 1959) and conceptualized informality as being beyond the reach of the state (AlSayyad, 1993; Bayat, 1997). The debate has gradually shifted from technical and legal explanations of informal production toward a more nuanced understanding of the way the urban marginalized employ solidarity and clientelistic networks to build and consolidate their neighborhoods. Unlike the dualist opposition, informality is conceived of as being intrinsic to the city as a whole (Perlman, 1976).

Influenced by the postcolonial endeavor to decenter Western “geographies of knowledge” (Robinson, 2002), insights from studies in the Urban South have broadened the understanding of the interrelation between capitalist exploitation, informality, and resistance. The governing of poor settlements is itself intrinsically tied to informal practices and thus underlies the political-economic structures of society (Roy, 2005). In order to qualify how informality produces social inequalities, “the distinction should not be between informality and formality, but rather by a differentiation within informality” (Roy, 2005: 149).

The term “informality” has recently been given a dynamic and politically disputed character. In fact, from the perspective of “urban Orientalism,” Angotti (2013: 139) has stated that the presumed neutrality of this term not only keeps its heterogeneous meanings hidden but also effectively harms marginalized communities in that it “gives all the power to the elite professional planners and leaves out any agency for the people who live and work in the ‘slums.’” As a result of this shift, urban planning becomes a form of “managing the undesirables” (Agier, 2011). Informality is no longer seen as opposed to planning but becomes a part of the strategic interventions of the state. This adds to sociopolitical inequality because “certain land uses and settlement patterns [are] designated as formal by the state while others are criminalized and maintained as ‘informal’” (Roy, 2012: 691).

Roy’s explanations of “elite informality” promote further research into how planning policies reproduce social, economic, and political inequalities. She makes the point that the elite’s informal practices are intrinsically related to those of the urban poor. This development of the concept rejects its technical neutrality. A diagnosis of the elite informality at work in metropolitan growth needs to acknowledge its double-edged character: the elite follow informal practices for their own benefit and at the same time reinforce informality as a signifier for urban decay and “Third-Worldness.” While the technical and neutral meanings of informality in urban Latin America have been called into question from a political point of view, the performative and strategic dimensions of informality have remained unrecognized. Therefore, real estate developers’ informal practices and their use of the term as a threat to valorize residential plans promoting “First World” architecture and lifestyles go largely unnoticed. Yet, it is such “othering” that enables these urban actors to justify their projects. The three cases analyzed here enable us to trace the way informality is appropriated by a heterogeneous set of actors to establish social distinction and show how these actors assume a formalizing position in urban planning by using informality.

## STUDYING THE USES OF INFORMALITY IN HUIXQUILUCAN: RESEARCH SETTING AND METHOD

Fieldwork was conducted in the municipality of Huixquilucan, in Mexico City's Western Zone.<sup>1</sup> Being the location of many of Mexico City's global city functions (Moreno-Carranco, 2014; Parnreiter, 2011), Huixquilucan consists of contrasting urban forms, from so-called fortified enclaves (Caldeira, 2000; Low, 2001) to working-class districts. Since the 1980s, urban growth in this area has been dominated by the spread of gated communities, golf clubs, shopping malls, and upper-middle-class neighborhoods.

Although 8,842 housing units for the upper-middle and upper classes were built during the first decade of this millennium, only 62 units have been recorded as economically affordable for the lower middle class.<sup>2</sup> The eastern area of Huixquilucan consists of 17 residential subdivisions (*fraccionamientos residenciales*), two gated communities, Ciudad Bosque Real (535 hectares) and Lomas Country Club (300 hectares), and several working-class neighborhoods (*colonias populares*), whereas ejidos and agrarian production are located west of Chamapa-Toluca highway.<sup>3</sup> Huixquilucan is the third-richest municipality in Mexico and has the second-highest income per capita (Sánchez, 2009; *Reforma*, December 4, 2012). However, the area shows high segregation on a microscale, with contrasting urban forms side by side (González, 2009; Tapia, 2011) (Figure 1). The contrasting urban lifestyles have led to "social homogeneity, reciprocal isolation and closure, mutual indifference, stigmatization, and fear" (Bayón and Saraví, 2012: 35).

Moreover, the development in Huixquilucan has been characterized by growing tension over land designated for building. Its growth has not been restricted to the rich. There is also a need for adequate housing for construction workers, private security guards, and household servants in the residential developments. The municipal urban development plan refers to a deficit of 6,800 units of housing for this workforce (Huixquilucan, 2009: 75). The rapid development of this remote urbanization depends on a workforce whose presence is still marginalized. Land prices are constantly rising as land becomes scarce, while investment in public infrastructure is concentrated in areas for the wealthy. In this sense, what the municipal planning documents call the "informal" occupation of land by the urban poor is a result of urban growth and lack of adequate housing (Benlliure and Eibenschutz, 2008). In Mexico City, 60 percent of the territory has been designated as "informally" occupied (Duhau and Giglia, 2008). Yet, for three decades now, real estate developers have advanced a formalizing mission by promising that their investment will stop "informal sprawl" (*Reforma*, March 13, 1998). In order to obtain construction permits, real estate developers have used a discourse of fear of the "informal other." This strategy has strongly affected urban planning, having material and sociopolitical repercussions for neighborhoods defined as "informal."<sup>4</sup>

In its earliest version, the planning document for urbanizing the area of Huixquilucan specified policies for solving two basic problems. The first was to improve the road system to connect the expanding and privately administered residential areas, and the second was to stop the clandestine and illegal subdivision of ejido lands and other "informal practices" of urbanization



Figure 1. Contrasting urban forms: the last remaining *colonias populares* in Interlomas. (Photo Frank Müller, 2012)

(*Gaceta del Gobierno*, September 10, 1990). In that document and in the following one eight years later (*Gaceta del Gobierno*, December 21, 1998), the planning committee said that it would stop the “informal spread” of “popular housing” throughout the ejidal and conservation areas. Urban planning in Huixquilucan has resulted in less access to land for the popular sectors, but the “informal” land occupations have not ceased to exist. Indeed, the designation of more and more land for “formal” urbanization pressures these sectors into illegal occupations by definition.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, in a strongly polarized area, urban planning has favored real estate projects for the upper classes.

During two fieldwork phases (October–November 2011 and September–November 2012), 22 semistructured and problem-focused qualitative interviews were conducted with real estate developers, homeowners’ association members, and inhabitants of residential subdivisions, gated communities, and

working-class neighborhoods. We codified those parts of the interviews referring directly to local planning conflicts and induced diverse meanings that the interviewees related to them. These included informality as the practice of the poor, as related to certain urban districts (mainly in Mexico City's center), as the practice of politicians and real estate developers, and as coterminous with urban decay in moral, aesthetic, and hygienic terms. In a similar vein, we analyzed two decades of newspaper coverage (mainly *Reforma* and *El Universal*) on land conflicts in the area. Finally, we examined the municipal urban planning documents of 1990, 1998, 2003, and 2009 to see how the projected expansion of the road system and the designation of land for building cut through "informal settlements" and physically hindered their sprawl. Throughout our material, we have noticed that "informality" and "irregularity" are used interchangeably but the former is more widely used.

### THE USES OF INFORMALITY: "OTHERING," FEAR OF DECAY, AND ALLIANCES

In this context of conflictive appropriations of urban informality, various urban actors—from real estate developers to homeowners' associations—use different senses of the term to legitimize their positions as planning actors. Thus the use of informality relates its technical definition to its strategic role in land-use and place-defending disputes. Three cases in which the category "informality" is mobilized by social actors have been identified. The cases highlight the way these actors distinguish social relations. The first one refers to the strategies used by real estate investors to justify their intervention in urban planning with a "promise" to contain informality. They assume a social position as contributing positively to urban development by opposing the "informal poor." The second case refers to the practices of status defense and the delegitimizing of authorities and developers that the inhabitants of residential subdivisions and their representative organizations (the homeowners' associations) undertake to prevent the decay of their neighborhoods and to stave off informality. Finally, the third case focuses on an interclass alliance against informality and shows how informality produces inequality in urban space.

#### REAL ESTATE DEVELOPERS AND THE STAGING OF "OTHERING"

Observing Mexico City's progress toward urban modernity, the center-left magazine *Proceso* (1993) alluded to the imaginary of "First World" and "Third World" cities. This image was exhibited in the first full-service private gated development in the area, Lomas Country Club. The magazine particularly discusses the displacement initiated by the building of this place, which affected the residents of Montón Cuarteles, an adjacent working-class neighborhood. The leader of the neighborhood association, Daniel de los Ángeles, later explained (interview, November 25, 2012) that the neighborhood had been moved by the municipality from the land that Lomas Country Club occupies today, which had been ejido land of San Cristóbal Texcalucan. Gaspar Rivera

Torres, the main investor and the owner of FRISA (the most important real estate investor in the area), stated at the time that “to the advantage of the municipality, the project [Lomas Country Club] prevented the plot from being turned into an irregular settlement that would confront the authorities with the difficulties of reordering” (*Reforma*, August 12, 1994). During the inauguration ceremony, the developer Carlos Alcocer Wolff claimed that the steep hills and canyons were quasi-naturally prone to land invasions if they were not urbanized by intense investment initiatives.<sup>6</sup> With its construction, he said, Lomas Country Club would not only stop the spread of informal settlements but also improve precarious working-class neighborhoods. The municipality, the surrounding working-class neighborhoods, and the informal settlements would all benefit from the development.

When Ciudad Bosque Real was in the planning stages in 2000, the homeowners’ associations voted in favor of the approval, voicing the hope that the development would stop the spread of informality. One homeowners’ association’s president said, “I signed this letter and granted my approval because I wanted to protect my working-class neighborhood. If we do not order the development, the irregular settlements will soon expand up to us and connect to our utilities, as has already happened” (*Reforma*, January 28, 2000). He referred to informal urbanization as a *mancha* (stain) and, although he recognized that there would be increasing traffic from the 15,000 new homes, he considered the project an effective measure to stave off that informality. Backed by the residents’ approval, Espinoza of the Commission for the Economic Development approved the building of Ciudad Bosque Real shortly before the state elections.

When Ciudad Bosque Real, the largest privately administered and enclosed urban entity in Mexico, was taken over by a new investment group in 2008, local politicians such as the municipal president Alfredo del Mazo Maza (2010) of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (Institutional Revolutionary Party—PRI) applauded the decision to build schools and hospitals to enhance the development of the municipality. This rhetoric expresses a duality in urban development discourse that opposes urban modernization, as a universal and teleological process, to underdevelopment (Robinson, 2004). From this perspective, private initiatives advance cooperation that supports weak public institutions. During this takeover, the new owner of the project, Marcos Salame (2010: 17), alluded to his group’s support for the local authorities’ plan to develop “First World” urban lifestyles by containing informal settlements and preventing land invasions.

However, such promises are not restricted to a technical dimension of better urban infrastructure and architecture; they also add a dimension of social distinction to their narrative. In a personal conversation, the commissioner of the ejido San Cristóbal Texcalucan, Sabino Lara, stated that the ejidal commission—which had to agree to sell communal land (Assies, 2007)—had accepted Rivera Torres’s offer to pay 80 Mexican pesos per square meter to avoid the problem of losing its land to invasions: “We noticed that our uncultivated plots were being informally invaded and that we were losing the battle as we were confronted with different powers, and at some point we decided to sell parts of our land that we had occupied for centuries” (Sabino Lara, November 21, 2012).



Lara described the critical moment at which the ejido entered into the capitalist logic of individual ownership, when the ejidatarios saw themselves confronted with both the settlers who invaded their unused land and the investors in the residential subdivisions and gated communities. His statement is in line with the historical dimension of the conjunction of developmentalism and urbanization (Cruz, 2001).<sup>7</sup> He describes the informal practice of land invasion as a threat and an opportunity to accumulate material profit by selling land to real estate developers.<sup>8</sup>

At the same time, real estate developers also benefit from the informal practice of invasions. In 2003 a former union leader, Rodolfo Bastida, paid his people to invade building sites in the expensive residential southeastern area of the municipality and press the landowners for money. He claimed to be the legitimate heir of Beatriz Muciño, who had held land titles dating back to 1900. The practice of land invasion serves as a volatile weapon in the dispute for land. On the one hand, because of the invasions, real estate developers were forced into negotiations with Bastida in 2003 (*Reforma*, December 2, 2003) and in 2012 (*Reforma*, December 4, 2012). On the other hand, real estate firms had a convincing argument to pressure the state to expropriate and subdivide the land and then sell it to them, thereby creating predictable and orderly urban development. The "informal" land occupation practice of invasion, commonly understood as practice of the urban poor (Cornelius, 1975; Schütze, 2005), is thus not restricted to the urban poor but tied to land valorization processes.

In short, this use of informality by politicians and real estate agents, which is associated with the irregularity of settlements of the poor and presented as a danger, seeks to justify urban enterprises. These enterprises bring real estate developers and ejidatarios into a fruitful coalition as they profit from the conversion of uncultivated soil into land that can be urbanized. Upper-class inhabitants, real estate developers, and politicians agree upon land-use changes that promote urbanization through large real estate projects. Thus, progress and modernization have been hyped as arguments in favor of containing informal urbanization. However, although the homeowners' associations could be seen as benefiting from an end to informal sprawl, they also raise their voices against the developers' informal actions.

#### HOMEOWNERS' ASSOCIATIONS AND THE IMAGINARY OF DECAY

The main actors of the second case are homeowners' associations, which focus on the defense of the inhabitants of residential subdivisions against land-use changes within their respective developments. These are only semi-closed and must be distinguished from gated communities. Whereas the homeowners' associations of gated communities are composed of professionals hired by the developments' management, those of the 17 residential subdivisions consist of elected neighbors. The participation of neighbors is differently organized: only in the case of the residential subdivisions do neighbors in each association come together on a weekly basis to discuss and distribute tasks. To discuss more general problems concerning security, environmental, and urban planning issues and strategies to deal with them, each of the homeowners' associations sends a

representative to a roundtable with the municipal authorities. In this participatory space, the inhabitants of the residential subdivisions mobilize against informality when defending their own places. In their narratives, the fear of being downgraded to a working-class neighborhood motivates such mobilization. In this process, the inhabitants not only attempt to avoid the arrival of new neighbors or the consolidation of new uses, especially commercial and nonresidential ones, but also claim their own rights to monitor real estate developers and public authorities and to authorize land-use changes.

During a press conference on November 27, 2012, Armando Andrade and Salvador Onofrietti, president and vice president of the Homeowners' Association of Tecamachalco respectively, presented an evaluation of several informalities. Among them were instances of noncompliance with zoning laws and land-use prescriptions in the residential subdivisions and the neighboring commercial area, Interlomas. They argued that there were three issues of greatest importance. The first was the construction of 720 luxury apartments in Interlomas, which they believed would have a devastating effect on the environment and traffic density. The second was the construction in Tecamachalco of Triángulo, a commercial center including 2,750 single-family housing units. From their point of view, this center would attract street vendors and cause more traffic and pollution in addition to violating the land-use prescriptions that they had signed in buying their plots in the residential subdivision (Figure 2). Lastly, when on December 31, 2002, the *Gaceta del Gobierno* had certified the land-use change to allow for higher density in Ciudad Bosque Real, it had specified that, as a condition, 12 urban development projects had to be built in the municipality, including a highway, a kindergarten, and a school. Residents opposed both the failure to fulfill these agreements and the lack of transparency of the negotiations.

Andrade spoke of the neighbors' fear that their area could be transformed into a working-class neighborhood. His explanations suggest that this "other" would imply a moral, aesthetic, and economic downgrading of their residential subdivision. The associations were founded as defensive institutions grounded in the constitutional right to be asked for agreement before changes in density and types of allowed uses (commercial or residential) can be made in the municipal urban planning document. Andrade stressed the need for monitoring and control to ensure that planning authorities acted in compliance with planning documents and land-use prescriptions. He attributed residents' lack of confidence in the reliability of real estate developers and state authorities to the negotiated founding acts of land appropriation and expressed doubt that the authorities were capable of containing informality: "The most serious problems of Huixquilucan are the lack of recognition of urban development law and the consequent generalized informality. Thus, developers take advantage of any legal gap or possible means to develop their projects, and an indulgent authority provides authorization or licenses" (interview, October 10, 2012). From his perspective, neither planning officials nor real estate developers had any real commitment to respecting planning documents and the environment of the established neighborhoods.

Furthermore, Andrade linked the danger of decay to characteristics he considered typical of working-class neighborhoods:



**Figure 2.** Homeowners' association sign warning against street vending on the edge of the construction site of Central Park. (Photo Frank Müller, 2012)

To begin with, there aren't any laws in working-class neighborhoods. There, those who rule are the groups and gangs. Water, electricity, telephone, and all that, we do not know whether we will have it or not. The streets will be worse, and we will have shops everywhere. If it converts into a working-class neighborhood . . . there will be trucks everywhere, and there will be chaos just as in any working-class neighborhood, in Iztapalapa or in Guerrero, or in any of those neighborhoods, which are truly left to God's will.

These words show a strategic ambivalence that is central to the associations' rhetoric. From the residents' perspective, represented by the homeowners' associations, the risk of being converted into a working-class neighborhood is based on the informal logic of real estate initiatives. In order to defend their community, these associations rhetorically appropriate the

prevalent imaginary of informality as characteristic of popular settlements and change it to signify the practice of unrestrained real estate developers in collaboration with the state.

Informality underlies the imaginary of the inhabitants of the residential subdivisions as something that endangers not only their well-being but also their lifestyle and perceived quality of life. The signifier feels a desire to achieve social distinction similar to the discourse of fear that Low (2010: 90) identifies as underlying homogeneous and “normalized” spaces. As a consequence, the neighbors assume a “formalizing mission” based on their right to defend their property from decay. In their narrative, informality is deployed as a dynamic referent to produce sociocultural distinction and validate spatial differentiation.

### INTERCLASS ALLIANCES AGAINST INFORMALITY

In the last case, informality is a device employed in claim making and land-use disputes across the frontiers between gated communities, residential subdivisions, and working-class neighborhoods. While mobilization against informal practices and state arbitrariness forges alliances among the inhabitants of these heterogeneous urban forms, the alliance remains ambivalent and fragile because of unequal self-understanding and unequal recognition by the public authorities.

As we have seen, public planning documents tend to consider creating a road system connecting luxurious real estate projects with the city a basic municipal problem. The certification of the gated community Ciudad Bosque Real was conditioned on the construction of a highway connection between the highway to Toluca and, passing through Interlomas and the Hueyetlaco Canyon, the neighboring borough of Cuajimalpa. This connection would have primarily served the residents of Ciudad Bosque Real, and it was part of the written agreement between FRISA and the municipality (*Gaceta del Gobierno*, December 21, 1998). Because Article 115 of the constitution requires the approval of homeowners’ associations for changes in land-use classifications and zoning, the residents of the gated communities and the residential subdivisions but not those of the working-class neighborhoods were asked for approval of the Ciudad Bosque Real project. The associations gave their approval on the condition that the developers improve the road system and build the Hueyetlaco highway. Permits increasing the project’s allowable density were granted in 1999 and 2002 over the homeowners’ objections. Nine informal settlements were evicted, and the highway under construction already contributed to achieving one of the two primary local planning objectives by cutting through and impeding the expansion of the working-class neighborhoods San Fernando and El Olivo.

The developers have gone on to obtain not only permits to continue building in the gated community but also a permit to build a tunnel connecting Ciudad Bosque Real with Interlomas. This tunnel has been bitterly contested by the residents of the residential subdivisions and those of the working-class neighborhoods, the former complaining about the aggravation of traffic volume in their neighborhoods and the latter (under whose houses the tunnel is supposed

to pass) fearing tectonic instability and resettlement. The two groups, despite different motivations, have a complaint in common: that the actions of public planning officials are not transparent and favor the gated community. "It's an Unprecedented Neighborhood Unification in Huixquilucan" was the headline of the local section of the newspaper *Reforma* on November 22, 2012. The newspaper highlighted the exceptional nature of this alliance, which, despite the aforementioned homeowners' associations' constraints on the working-class neighborhoods, reflected their decreasing confidence in state protection against a common threat to their respective communities. As Luis Trueba (president of the Rincón de la Herradura homeowners' association) explained (interview, October 24, 2012), the tunnel lacked the necessary backup in local planning documents and therefore had to be considered an informal intervention. As part of their monitoring function, the associations revealed a "general informality" at work: "When we analyzed a little more closely we found enormous areas whose land-use prescriptions had changed and that had been designated for building." The president expressed residents' unwillingness to accept changes that would benefit the developers in violation of their right to be consulted. "They want to run [the tunnel] right through our working-class neighborhoods. Apparently we are not able to receive such an enormous amount of traffic as that from Bosque Real." Although physically the tunnel was not passing under the houses of the residential subdivisions, he used the pronoun "our," indicating a group identity that included the residents of the working-class neighborhoods. He criticized the unexpected and arbitrary change of densities and construction regulations and said, "This clearly shows that they are building with a high degree of informality." Although the developers of Ciudad Bosque Real are attempting to create the impression that their actions contribute to the orderly development of Huixquilucan, they are looking after private interests. What is more, the channeling of the permitting process and of protest by urban planning reproduces inequality between the different urban forms and the inhabitants of the area.

According to their leader, Daniel de los Ángeles, the working-class neighborhoods' residents recognize themselves as informal because of their failure to pay taxes or conform to construction regulations. After five decades of struggle for land and resettlement, he explained, residents' claims are usually voiced not directly but through political party intermediaries and community upgrading projects. With the threat posed by the tunnel, the growing pressure of real estate developers' investment became a tipping point for taking action. He highlighted the differentiating effect of being labeled "informal": "We demonstrate in the streets while they [homeowners' associations] take legal steps and are received by the public authorities. We are not even asked for agreement when it is about development projects affecting us" (interview, November 25, 2012) (Figure 3). The working-class neighborhoods' inhabitants, not being received by the authorities to express their concerns, protested in front of the town hall. These demonstrations were reported as violent confrontations with the police (*El Universal*, December 7, 2012). Homeowners, in contrast, chose to confront the officials through legal measures. Beyond that, and despite their different agendas, the two groups conceived the injustices of urban planning as a common point. Planning documents and the breach of planning regulations



Figure 3. Protest at the tunnel construction site in Interlomas. (Photo Frank Müller, 2012)

thus reproduce sociopolitical inequality among the inhabitants of this contested periphery. The residents of residential subdivisions do not consider themselves informal or see informality as something they have to accept. The residents of working-class neighborhoods accept the informality that has been assigned to them throughout their history, but in mobilizing against the developers' violation of the planning framework they resist playing that role and instead claim their rights as citizens.

Nevertheless, the alliance remains fragile and ambivalent. Carlos Zavala, a homeowners' association president, explained that, while the homeowners protest against the tunnel only to pressure the developers and authorities into completing the Hueyetlaco highway and solving the traffic problem, "for the working-class neighborhoods the struggle is for their existence, to defend their land" (interview, November 25, 2012). To justify and politically sustain their protest the homeowners' associations thus benefit from shifting the meaning of "informality" to signify unrestrained and uncontrolled urbanizations in general terms. Yet, the communities that have been the referent of the usual meaning of "informality," the working-class neighborhoods, continue to be marginalized, since for them the current projects may lead to at least partial resettlement. Moreover, the fact that they have been labeled "informal" may account for the failure to recognize them as equal bearers of rights today. The alliance, albeit widening the scope of meanings of informality, keeps the mechanisms for reproducing social inequalities intact.

## CONCLUSIONS

On the western periphery of Mexico City, the proximity of contrasting urban forms and lifestyles goes together with long-lasting struggles for land. There is an imaginary of uncontrollable urbanization in which the poor are the "other," the "undesirables." To better understand this state of affairs, this paper has analyzed the way the idea of informality is used and performed in identifying

the imaginary of the “other” as both a threat and a source of justification for private intervention toward urban modernization.

In metropolitan areas of urban growth, the technical, political, and symbolic dimensions of informality are entangled in contradictory and complex ways. In urban planning informality remains a technical-descriptive category that refers to the violation or circumvention of laws and planning regulations. Our study has proposed taking a relational and political understanding of informality farther to show how it marks social distinction in urban space and allows real estate developers and homeowners’ associations to take a formalizing position. In fact, this way of using informality preserves historically embedded mechanisms of marginalization intact.

Three cases were identified in which social actors involved in the production of urban space dispute meanings and empirical referents of informality. We have seen that the signifier is deliberately appropriated by developers in justifying the physical enclosure of neighborhoods and land appropriations and by homeowners’ associations in defending their neighborhoods from decay. Additionally, informality may be a shared referent in alliance mobilizing. It is the threat posed by informality that helps to explain how discourse becomes an effective strategy for justifying enclosures. In this context the image of the gated community is presented as a limiting factor to the expansion of informality. Simultaneously, the urban expansion in the area analyzed here, which lacks planning, is central to the rhetoric of defense of the inhabitants of the residential subdivisions. This rhetoric implies that they associate urban decay with the risk of having their subdivisions turned into working-class neighborhoods as a result of real estate investment. Likewise, although on the surface the inhabitants of residential subdivisions and working-class neighborhoods are opposed to one another, there exists an alliance between them that is built on the common ground of uncontrolled urbanization promoted by the local elite. Framed by a historically determined urban development discourse, the agency of real estate developers and the lack of restraint of the municipal authorities are contested by the residents of the working-class neighborhoods. The alliance, albeit ambivalent, constitutes a more nuanced picture of the urban “other.” As an empty signifier, this perceived informality motivates the popular classes to take action and defend their community. Yet, when it is appropriated to mark social distinction, in a historical context of an urban development discourse of “First World” versus “Third World” cities both developers and the urban upper classes continue to marginalize settlements and lifestyles.

Although it is still necessary and analytically fruitful to distinguish between formal and informal practices of urbanization, it is clear that each definition depends on the actors’ interests and behaviors. Studying these appropriations of informality as intersecting social distinction, planning documents, and policies reveals the highly politicized nature of the term. In these different modes of “gray spacing” (Wigle, 2014), the reconstitution of different meanings of informality plays a decisive role in managing and defining “desirable” and “undesirable” actors. However, beyond the specific effects discussed here, the analysis of the social uses of informality can uncover a disputed urban imaginary that corresponds to the material production of the city.

## NOTES

1. This area is made up of parts of two delegations of the Federal District (Álvaro Obregón and Cuajimalpa) and three municipalities in the State of Mexico (Huixquilucan, Naucalpan, and Atizapán de Zaragoza).

2. These numbers are the result of our own evaluation of the data collected by Pablo Benlliure and the Mexico-based real estate developer Demet. We are very grateful to the former for providing the raw data.

3. *Fraccionamientos residenciales* (residential subdivisions) are master-planned semi-closed residential areas whose residents often organize the closing-off of public streets. *Fraccionamientos cerrados* (gated communities) are completely closed and monitored private spaces. *Colonias populares* (working-class neighborhoods) are popular settlements for the lower-income segment of society, whose recording in official planning is subsequent to the urbanization of this area. An *ejido* has a communitarian urban structure based on the agricultural organization of the local economy.

4. In general, urban planning jurisdictions in Mexico have been decentralized from the state to the council during the past three decades. They are concerned with change in demographic densities, building heights, and land use. This transfer of jurisdictions has resulted in more flexible negotiations with pressure from private investors.

5. The 2009 version of the municipal plan of urban development counts 122 “irregular settlements” in the municipality compared with 63 in 2003 (Huixquilucan, 2009: 86).

6. The many steep canyons in the area pose difficulties for building. There are frequent landslides, especially during the rainy season. Hence, these areas have remained largely underurbanized. However, they have now become more attractive to investors because land for building in the Interlomas area is scarce.

7. This incorporation resulted from the change of Article 27 of the constitution in 1992 to allow dividing and selling and thus privatizing communal lands. Under the constitution of 1917 the *ejido* had institutionalized the redistribution of privatized land from the latifundios to farmers (see Connolly, 2009).

8. The *ejidatarios* of that area to date have only sold parts of their land, thereby entering the competition for land speculation.

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