

Urban informality as a signifier: Performing urban reordering in suburban Rio de Janeiro

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Frank I Müller

University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Abstract

Urban informality is typically ascribed to the urban poor in cities of the Global South. Drawing on Judith Butler's concept of performativity and taking the case of Rio de Janeiro in the context of the 2016 Olympic Games, this article conceptualizes informality as a signifier and a procedural, relational category. Specifically, it shows how different class actors have employed the signifier informality (1) to legitimize the confinement of marginalized populations; (2) to justify the organized efforts of the upper middle class to protect their 'self-enclosed' gated communities; and (3) to warrant the formation of opposition and alliances between inhabitants, activists, and researchers on the edges of the urban order. This article offers new perspectives to better understand the relationship between informality and confinement by examining the active role that inhabitants of marginalized settlements assume in the Olympic City.

Keywords

Confinement, performativity, Rio de Janeiro, urban housing, urban informality

Introduction

The spread of gated communities, as opposed to so-called 'informal settlements,' has been identified as a manifestation of urban development in Latin America (Gilbert, 1994; Rodgers et al., 2012). Due to structural dependencies of the Global South, urbanization has produced a dispossessed 'marginalized' working class (Castells, 1973), living in informal urban conditions on the outskirts of cities (Hardoy and Satterthwaite, 1987). Over decades, city and national governments in Latin America have confronted unequal urban development by continually modifying policies, strategies, and practices. Despite

Corresponding author:

Frank I Müller, Center for Urban Studies, University of Amsterdam, PO Box 19268, 1000 GG Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

Email: frank.mueller@fu-berlin.de

efforts, the material effect of such unequal development, namely insufficient infrastructural services and land titles, as well as the symbolic effect, specifically the stigmatizing association of those spaces with crime and poverty, have persisted.

The south-western suburbia of Rio de Janeiro is a showcase of privatized 'enclave urbanism' (Angotti, 2012), exclusive lifestyles and physical boundaries resembling characteristics of a North American model of suburban development (Hamel and Keil, 2016) that separates urban realities on a class basis. In the 1950s, this area was initially planned by the state to counter the 'chaotic' sprawl of human settlements (Herzog, 2013). Today, however, it is a conflictive space that is divided by contrasting private and public interests. While the exclusivity of privatized suburban space can be observed worldwide, this 'shift is quite dramatic' in Brazil since the periphery 'was often solely occupied by squatter settlements (favelas)' (Herzog, 2013: 130). In Rio de Janeiro, infrastructural projects and the Olympic Park have aggravated this dynamic throughout the last decade (Gaffney, 2014). With the Plano Estratégico (2013), the city government fostered urban transformation through a public-private strategy of 'marketing and urban planning' (Gaffney, 2014: 233). This neoliberal maneuver risked further marginalizing those residents and communities with precarious legal status concerning land ownership. Despite changing state-led formalization programs since the 1960s until the present, land tenure has remained uncertain and subject to negotiation and contestation, even in cases where land occupation had once been recognized by the state.¹ This suburb thus illustrates the interdependency of stark socioeconomic and sociopolitical contrasts, urban informality and spatial confinement in present-day Latin America.

Ever since the term informality was coined (Hart, 1973; ILO, 1972), informal urbanization has been perceived as a threat to progress in Latin American cities and beyond (Roy and AlSayyad, 2004). It is within this discourse that the imperatives of economic growth in a globalizing intercity competition while at the same time containing uncontrolled spread have become interwoven. In this respect, privately administrated gated communities seem to be a defensive reaction to a perceived 'state failure' (Koonings and Kruijt, 2004: 20ff.) in formalizing those settlements. In response to what is perceived as urban informality, real estate developers have taken over governance functions such as the provision of security (Coy, 2006). For this reason, more affluent and privileged classes have opted for spatial confinement in privately serviced, gated residencies (Caldeira, 2000; Low, 2001), while spatial confinement of the urban poor has been propelled through resettlement, policing, militarization, and stigmatization (Wacquant, 2008). This two-way confinement 'contributes to the fragmentation of urban space into exclusive, elite residential enclaves and ghettos, malls, and business districts' (Angotti, 2012: 11).

Recently, informality has received intensified academic attention as a tool for re-evaluating the building blocks of urban theory, in particular, of citizenship, infrastructure, and the state (Boudreau and Davis, 2016). This shift in focus advances an understanding of the term not as a static fact but as a procedural category through which spatial confinements can be studied as effects of power relations. Performativity (Butler, 1988, 2010) provides a theoretical lens to unpack the correlation between urban informality and spatial confinement. Spatial confinements, in 'slums'/favelas, social housing, and elite enclosures, are an outcome of class antagonism that is played out in urban land

appropriation conflicts. Informality is not simply a domain of the urban poor, as Roy and AlSayyad convincingly argue (2004); rather than referring to one objective fact, it is a signifier that is given meaning via ‘a series of acts which are renewed, revised and consolidated through time’ (Butler, 1988: 523). Introducing informality as a signifier allows for a better comprehension of how urban actors negotiate their influence vis-a-vis unstable urban planning processes.

Pursuing this aim, the article approaches informality as a social practice in which social positions are taken, ascribed, and contested. It examines studies on the discursive production of the favela that call attention to the fact that ‘language matters’ (Gilbert, 2007) in such sensitive contexts, thereby demonstrating that urban marginalization in Brazil has always been closely related to the favela as a social construct (Valladares, 2000). Regarding enclave urbanism not as an impersonal, merely structural effect of inequalities advances the inclusion and impact of social practices of distinction. Similar to residents of US ghettos, or French banlieues, Brazil’s favela residents are still depicted as ‘enemies of the nation’ (Wacquant, 2008: 56). By tracing the ‘territorial stigmatization’ (Wacquant, 2007: 67ff.) in the social uses of the signifier informality, the article follows a sociological practice approach (Bourdieu, 1977; Reckwitz, 2002) that assumes that material and symbolic power guides the everyday routines in which social groups position themselves in relation to a seemingly objective ‘informality.’

This informality is exemplified in the preparations for the Olympic Games in Brazil, which saw the forced resettlements of thousands of poor families out of supposedly informal settlements towards the urban outskirts of Rio de Janeiro and into fenced social housing complexes (Faulhaber, 2012). Such actions played out against a backdrop of exclusive gated communities for the upper middle class that have perpetuated socio-economic disparities and spatial fragmentation in the country (Coy, 2006; Popular Committee, 2015). In a decade-old narrative of progress, employing the signifier of informality justifies a set of sociospatial transformations to confine the urban poor to the city’s edges. Specifically, it shows how different class actors have employed the signifier informality (1) to legitimize the confinement of marginalized populations; (2) to justify the organized efforts of the upper middle class to protect their ‘self-enclosed’ gated communities; and (3) to warrant the formation of opposition and alliances between inhabitants, activists, and researchers on the edges of the urban order. These three functions that construct the diverse meanings of informality will be discussed in more detail after establishing the article’s conceptual contribution to the debate on urban informality in the following sections.

Global connections and local confinements – Rio’s Olympic stage

The favela is a highly politicized and contested notion (Gonçalves, 2013). The shift from negligence to integration of ‘informal’ areas into ‘formal’ urban development projects, as well as the provision of urban infrastructural services and upgrading, have been considered central elements of democratic transition (Cities Alliance, 2012). With Rio’s population growing extensively in the 1960s and 1970s, insufficient investment in public transportation and housing for the rural migrants contributed to a spread of low-income

settlements together with a densification of intercity areas as well as peripheral extension, with the highest growth rates in favelas usually lacking secure land ownership (Perlman, 2007: 6). During the city's population boom, forced resettlements were a constant reality for the urban marginalized population (Perlman, 2007) and despite transforming policies and norms since the democratic transition (Gonçalves and Pilo', 2017) they remain a threat still today. The proximity of socioeconomic classes and respective urban forms established zoning authorization as a strategic tool to open up investment opportunities and to marginalize those who could not afford access to the formal land market (Maricato, 2017a).

Branding of the Olympic City (Diniz, 2013; Prefeitura, 2014) went hand in hand with investment-friendly, securitization-oriented measures and provided a local stage for fostering geopolitical aspirations (Santos Junior et al., 2015; Turok, 2014: 131ff.). While gentrification, resettlements of lower income populations, and the spread of exclusive lifestyles and architecture in Rio de Janeiro preceded the transformations related to the mega-event preparation (De Queiroz Ribeiro, 2014; Gaffney, 2015), these urban development aspects nonetheless accelerated the marginalization of the urban poor. Even if these transformations did not occur 'because of mega-events,' they are still 'in service to the shifting processes of capital accumulation in which they are embedded' (Gaffney, 2014: 235).

The Olympic City preparations stimulated urban reordering within Rio de Janeiro regarding transport infrastructure, public-private partnerships in real estate development, and securitization.² These three mechanisms were accompanied by social housing programs to confront the spread and densification of favelas. Motivating positive international recognition, the City Statute (Lei N° 10.257/2001) implemented the constitutional definition of a 'social function of property' (Art. 182 and 183 of the Brazilian Constitution) by granting more rights to the lower income classes (Fernandes, 2011). Rio de Janeiro's 'Morar Carioca'³ and the federal social housing program 'Minha Casa Minha Vida' (MCMV)⁴ have attempted to broaden access to formal ownership by either integrating the favelas into the tax-paying and serviced city (Lei N° 1656/2003) or resettling inhabitants into newly built social housing complexes (Lei N° 11.977/2009). Although the latter has been evaluated as a successful public-private effort to counter the global crisis of the housing market at its peak in 2008 (Cardoso and Leal, 2010), it binds beneficiaries to decade-long financial debt. Confronting a 'chaotic' sprawl through 'social cleansing' (Maricato, 2010), the programs implement the resettlement of the lower income classes away from perceived risk areas or areas of public interest. Together with the increasing militarization of such settlements (Freeman, 2014), the programs exhibit a further marginalization of the urban poor.

The south-western expansion of Rio de Janeiro, specifically the administrative units of Barra da Tijuca and Jacarepaguá, provides an adequate case to study spatial confinement in the context of this neoliberal reordering. This suburbia is emblematic of stark socioeconomic contrasts and fragmented urban development (Cardoso, 1989; Rolnik, 2015). Between 1991 and 2010, its rapid growth was linked to a population decline in the city's central areas (Censo, 2010). In conjunction, new construction for upper-middle-class residential use was predominantly licensed in this region of the city while low-income housing got pushed further to the west (Prefeitura, 2016a). This illustrates the

tendency of land valorization in socioeconomically differentiating terms. Growing ‘informal’ settlements, on the one hand, are curbing the construction of new apartment buildings. Yet, on the other hand, such limitation avoids an inflation of the real estate market with regard to land and thus allows the market to cultivate its ongoing valorization (Luna Freire, 2013: 125).

We can assume a conflictive tension at play here: the non-licensed growth of marginalized settlements keeps their inhabitants in a legal limbo in which eviction remains a constant threat with investment-intensive urbanization appearing as a solution to this legal instability. The situation strengthens the position of private developers in urban planning vis-a-vis an allegedly ‘weak’ state, which fails to regulate urban development. However, as Raquel Rolnik convincingly argues, in contrast to a ‘common sense [that] attributes disorder in cities to the “lack of government presence” especially with respect to informal settlements’ (Rolnik, 2011: 245), such disorder is part ‘of a strategy to maximize the individual interests of bureaucrats, congressmen and businessmen involved in contracts and service provision to the state.’ Such a situation is made possible by keeping zoning laws flexible, which creates investment opportunities, particularly on those lands that are ‘informally’ occupied (Rolnik, 2011). In the last two decades, and particularly during the preparation for mega-events, this neoliberal move towards urban development in the private, real estate investors’ interest has become the rule rather than the ‘exception’ (Maricato, 2017b; Ong, 2007).

In Rio’s south-western suburb, this reality stands in contrast to the 1969 original master plan by Lucio Costa, which resembles the modernist ideals of functionalist planning (Costa, 1969). The architect and planner outlined a ‘place to escape the increasing stress of urbanization and the chaos of the increasingly unplanned favela growth’ (Herzog, 2013: 125). According to this first planning document for the area, urban development should be publicly planned, yet privately exercised and oriented towards social and environmental sustainability. In spite of the original plan, the area was largely prone to the initiatives of private developers, for which the signifier informality assumes an important role.

A performative approach to urban informality

Informality first entered urban studies as a category to understand the capitalist tendency to marginalize the migrant population in Latin American metropolises. Respective studies and policy responses reproduced a conceptual dualism between structural exclusion of informal workers (Castells, 1973) and a culture of poverty that was characterized by solidarity and social networks (Perlman, 1977). More recently, informal slums or favelas have been frequently depicted as places of decay, criminal gangs, and poverty by both academia and the general public (Wacquant, 2007). In terms of modernization theories (De Soto, 1989), formalization has accordingly been understood as a key driver for economic prosperity and social mobility. These decade-long debates have been stripping the meaning of the term ‘informality’ down to its basis: class struggle.

During the last decade, contributions to urban planning theory have critically examined the dichotomy between the formal ‘First World City’ and urban informality (Porter, 2011). As a ‘mode of the production of space’ (Roy, 2009: 826), informality has entered

the everyday language of social, political, and economic actors. Key contributions to the field problematize the spatial dynamics in governing informality (Wigle, 2014). It is in this regard that informality is not a static fact but a procedural category. Informality has become a topic for writing about urban resistance against hegemonic narratives. The continuing disenfranchisement of a significant portion of the urban population in the Global South has led to a 'quiet encroachment' (Bayat, 2000) of the urban poor through the development of extensive coping strategies. Such 'insurgent forms of citizenship' (Holston, 2009) emerge in situations of non- or deregulation of basic services such as water, electricity, and shelter in perceived informal settlements. Informality thus is not a marker of the urban poor's form of urbanization, but in truth a power relation. Studying informality as a power relation requires looking beyond the narrow focus on the urban poor and, instead, towards a wider range of actors that despite the signifier's 'performative fluidity' (Butler, 1988: 528) function to stabilize its exclusive meaning.

Informality is, in parallel to what Butler has shown for the category gender, a matter of agency. Deconstructing informality's presumed stable meaning thus allows us to understand the effects that the term's use engender in urban space. This is a valuable approach given that the ongoing 'precaritization' (Butler, 2015) and the diverse insecurities that characterize the livelihood of low-income communities are becoming normalized through the hegemonic use of informality as a threat to progressive urban development.

I propose regarding informality as a socially performed role, a doing informality (West and Zimmermann, 1987), because it functions akin to the social construction of gender roles. Informality is an ascribed and situationally self-assumed role that conditions one's position in urban spaces. The functions of informality, which I will present next, will 'draw our attention to the diverse mechanisms of that construction' (Butler, 2010: 147). To this end, I do not aim to provide a new holistic understanding of what informality is, but rather propose a methodology by which we can study the mechanisms of constituting the category as well as its sociospatial effects.

Contested confinement in the south-western suburb of Rio de Janeiro

This section elaborates on three interrelated functions of informality: the first approaches informality as a threat and focuses on how the signifier is employed by real estate developers; the second studies current urban interventions in the area through defensive actions taken by homeowner associations from the upper middle class; and the third explores how involuntary resettlements relate to strategic appropriation of the signifier informality.

Fieldwork was conducted in the areas of Canal do Anil, Vila do Pan and Curicica in Jacarepaguá, and Vila Autódromo in Barra da Tijuca. The case selection was made on the basis of attentive media analysis of the mainstream press and discussions with urbanists from the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro. I was purposefully looking for frictions regarding land use in this conflictive area (see Figure 1). However, beyond a classic case study, this article attempts to advance current debates on informality as a power-laden term. In this sense, I introduce my case as a way to distinguish between the use of informality on the ground as well as by different actors. In the following sections,

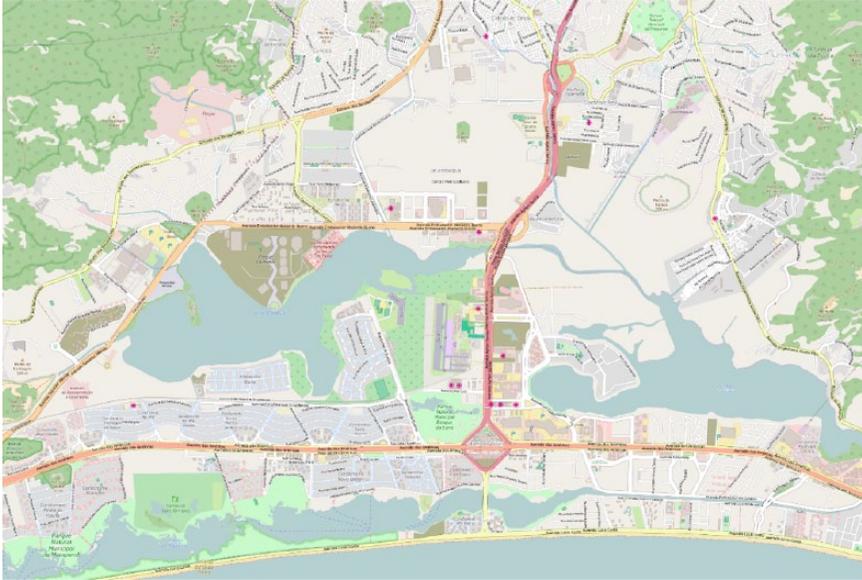


Figure 1. The south-western expansion of Rio de Janeiro.

Source: Prefeitura (2016b).

I differentiate the meanings, and the politics related to the stabilization of meanings, that informality can take on.

These functions were inductively identified on the basis of semi-structured interviews, content analysis, and participant observations. Over a period of eight months, I conducted a total of 23 interviews with residents, members of homeowner and neighborhood associations, as well as a sales accountant. Informal conversations in four communities, as well as observation during protests and a public hearing, allowed me to complete my understanding of the social dynamics in the field.

Informality as threat

In this first function, the principal actors are real estate developers who present ‘informal’ settlements as a threat to urban development. Such a narrative has strengthened their position vis-a-vis public urban planning authorities. Although there are examples of the dubious legality of landholding and ownership, real estate developers defend their privileged position by claiming to contribute to the ordered urban development of the south-western areas of the city (*O Globo*, 2011). Strongly contributing to this narrative, informality is affiliated with environmental deterioration, economic failure, and criminality in the settlements of the urban poor. Under this assumption, developers are capable of influencing municipal decisions with respect to the distribution of public investment in those areas (Fernandes, 2013).

A recent example is Ilha Pura, located in Barra da Tijuca, which has been deemed one of the most luxurious privately administrated gated developments. The project’s

portfolio makes reference to Lucio Costa's original master plan for the area (Carvalho Hosken e Odebrecht, 2013; Costa, 1969: 10). The marketing director of Ilha Pura, Ricardo Correa, expanded on this narrative. According to Correa, the Ilha Pura project would reduce 'the number of informal settlements in the area' and he further stated, 'With less favelização [favelaization], we will have less contamination and better preservation of the natural environment' (Correa, cited in Pfeifer, 2011: 17).

Such claims to reconfigure the sociospatial structure of the area through walls and boundaries were based on aesthetic and moral values. In this same vein, the project's main investor, Carlos Carvalho, one of the municipality's partners in preparing the area for the Olympic Games, justified the forced eviction of the low-income community in Vila Autódromo, whose settlement he considered to be informal concerning the land he acquired (BBC, 2015). This ascription of informality as a powerful form of narrative stigmatization fosters the confinement of lower income communities, which are perceived as a threat to progress.

However, as the project's sales accountant explained, such enclave urbanism is a reaction to the failure of the municipality in guaranteeing ordered urban development (Edesio, interview, 14 April 2015). He argued that contractors and clients would logically share an interest in increasing the value of their community by 'guaranteeing an aesthetic identity, based on commonly shared rules' (Edesio, interview, 14 April 2015). He continued: 'Just see, we are building a city that complies with predictable urban standards.' The logic behind such a position can be summarized as follows: where public urban planning fails, private real estate developers take over the task of assimilating all tendencies that potentially threaten the city's formal order. Therefore, informality acts as a signifier that serves to re-establish the hegemonic group's – in this case, the real estate developer – power to define the limits of urban order.

Informality and social distinction

This second function focuses on the use of the informality signifier by the homeowner associations (HAs) of two gated communities in the research area: Vila Panamericana and Cidade Jardim. Here, informality justifies the defensive organization of neighbors and lets residents of the upper middle class experience a diminished form of marginalization, that is to say, out of sight, out of mind. The HAs identify the 'disordered growth of the population' by favelas in proximity to closed condominiums as the most severe problem of the area (*Nosso Bairro*, 2015: 8). Consistent with its dominant meaning, informality becomes coterminous with growing crime rates and environmental degradation, thereby stigmatizing the informal 'invasion' of the area (Waldeck, interview, 5 May 2015). Implementing the signifier, the HA positions itself as the corrective institution in urban planning.

The HAs act within these communities alongside representative residents with regard to urban planning issues. Their call for lifestyle protection intersects with a self-perception as inhabitants of a 'First World' urban environment (ASCIJA, 2015). Behind the claim for a guarantee of aesthetic and moral values lies the aspiration of the community to stand out as a showcase of ordered urbanization. As part of this strategy, however, real estate developers' informal roles threaten the interests of the HAs themselves. Consequently, they

pressure local public authorities to act against developers. For instance, Vila Panamericana's association called the planning permission for new upper-middle-class condominiums as a 'criminal act' (*O Globo*, 2015) at a public hearing. The representative of the HA explains that the newly built area was unacceptable due to its incomplete sanitation system: 'The government's failure is menacing our well-being. This is an area that everyone invades without limits. And the authorities need to be controlled as they let everyone do what they want here' (Erick, interview, 23 May 2015).

The HAs employ their political capital to defend themselves against such marginalization. As an example, in 2010 the Vila Panamericana HA supported a legislative attempt to create a new area: 'Barra Olímpica' (Lei N° 807/2010). According to the project's consultant, an increase in the economic value of real estate in the area would be restricted to upper-middle-class condominiums (Caban, interview, 11 April 2015). In addition, a flexible redefinition of boundaries through the subsequent incorporation into the more prestigious Barra da Tijuca would bring other improvements, such as connections to urban infrastructure and general access to municipal services (*O Globo*, 2014).

Interestingly, associations from the upper middle class use 'informality' not only to stigmatize settlements of the 'urban poor' but also to report on the practices of real estate developers along with the paralysis of public authorities to act. What is more, their members now share the experience of marginalization with the 'urban poor' against urban reordering. This leads to the conclusion that informality becomes a shared signifier whose meaning is appropriated both to asymmetrically 'demonize' (Yiftachel, 2009: 90) actors from low-income groups as well as real estate developers while justifying the advocacy of HAs in the urban development circus.

The informality of resettlements and strategic appropriations

This last function focuses on informality as a signifier to justify social fragmentation and involuntary resettlements while advancing the internal divisions of marginalized communities, on the one hand, and the strategic formation of alliances by inhabitants, activists, and researchers, on the other hand.

Resettlements. Ongoing dynamics of involuntary resettlements in the south-west of the city underline the complexity of spatial confinement. Resettlements are comprised primarily of compulsory acquisitions along with individual compensations through either subsidized renting or the provision of a new apartment by means of the federal social housing program MCMV (Prefeitura, 2013).⁵ Due to its proximity to the Olympic Park, the community of Vila Autódromo is considered a showcase of a specific type of resettlement that develops in parallel to mega-events (Rolnik, 2015). Founded by migrant families in the 1960s, and despite being granted land-use rights by the municipality in the early 1990s (Luna Freire, 2013: 107ff.), the community continued to be evicted. Owing to the transformations brought about by the Olympic City, the community was threatened by the expansion of the Bus Rapid Transport (BRT) system in 2009. By March 2016, 300 families accepted relocation or compensation packages, with 150 families still resisting displacement (see Figure 2). A former community leader of Vila Autódromo emphasized that although they had been developing an alternative plan (AMPVA, 2013) together



Figure 2. One of the last remaining houses of Vila Autódromo in front of the Olympic Village. The graffiti refers to the community's internal divides by stating: 'We are not fools. We know who is in the fight and who is behind the money.' Photo and translation by the author.

with Rio de Janeiro's Institute for Urban and Regional Planning (IPPUR) that would have allowed for some of the original houses to coexist within the new community, the Secretariat for Housing (SH) still went ahead and destroyed those buildings (Inalva, interview, 22 April 2015). An award from Deutsche Bank acknowledged the concerted effort of (inter)national activists, residents, architects, and urban planners to develop an alternative plan to transform the Vila Autódromo community.

However, involuntary resettlements produce social and architectonic confinement. In the case of Vila Autódromo, inhabitants were relocated to the MCMV project of Parque Carioca, located less than two kilometers from the original settlement. A profoundly different reality awaits: similar to many of the state social housing projects, the architectonic arrangement reinforces the supervision of residents' movements. The arrangement of 20 five-story apartment blocks that house up to 500 families strictly forbids architectonic adjustments, including the modification of paths or public areas (Dieguez, Secretariat for Housing, interview, 9 September 2015) (see Figure 3).

Technical administration teams are present on a daily basis to ensure maintenance of this arrangement. At a later stage, a team of social workers is assigned to each of the 16 residential blocks. Their task is to organize meetings with residents and to establish close ties with families. 'Proximity,' social worker Leila explained, 'is helpful for us, as we stay informed about every movement – like newcomers, new partnerships, and so on' (Leila, interview, 12 August 2014). The social housing programs implement formalization at a most intimate level of moral conduct, where architectonic arrangements and social work are designed to increase residents' acceptance of the new living circumstances.



Figure 3. ‘My House, My Life,’ (MCMV) project Parque Carioca, Rio de Janeiro, still uninhabited.

Photo by the author.

At the same time, defeating informality functions as symbolic capital. In a public hearing at the Rio de Janeiro State Parliament, delegate Paulo Ramos (Partido Socialismo e Liberdade) was asked to act as mediator for the settlement of Vila União de Curicica. The community was divided according to the inhabitants’ willingness to accept or reject resettlement. For those who did not have sufficient proof of legal tenure, or sufficient income to repay the monthly loan payments, relocation was not a viable option. However, Ramos applied the informality signifier as a symbol of a levered socioeconomic status that ‘everyone can only want to overcome’ (Ramos, 2015). Formalization by resettlement is employed as a symbol of progress and development for the area and its inhabitants. The construction of the BRT has played a decisive role in this narrative: ‘With the BRT in front of their new doors, it is difficult for me to understand that some see formalization of their livelihoods as a menace’ (Ramos, 2015). Whereas the case demonstrates how resettlements are legal instruments that produce spatial confinement, the following shows that informality is not only a division between authorities and citizens but is also a powerful category that splits communities internally. Delegate Ramos’s narrative can be interpreted as a projection of an architectonic model that resembles upper-middle-class gated settlements for the urban poor. At the same time, the incarnation of informality also co-produces spatial confinement. Throughout the interactions within the divided community, informality accumulates power as a signifier that involves the urban poor in a process of spatial reordering.

Strategic appropriations. Informality is linked to spatial confinement in another, even more socially fragmenting and legally precarious form. As a reverse to the strategic appropriation of the ascribed role of informality, the signifier also motivates the

self-organized formalization by low-income groups. Little more than 300 meters away from the gated community of Vila Panamericana, the settlement Canal do Anil has continued to grow, despite facing several attempts of removal, as reported by an inhabitant (Solange, interview, 25 April 2015). In 2008, the residents' association (Associação de Moradores do Canal do Anil, AMCA) agreed to a local planning document that includes subdividing the area into individual plots (Bendito, interview, 25 April 2015). In an attempt to define the settlement's legal growth, the document physically limited its expansion to an area of approximately two hectares and recognized the presence of 500 families. However, at present (2016), 2000 families inhabit this plot of land.

The plan did not automatically imply the formalization of land possessions via cadastral registration. By recognizing the collective right as a whole, the plan guarantees compensation in the case of forced evictions.⁶ A *de facto* legal tenure was only granted to individual households if they could prove continual use through photos, utility bills, or construction material receipts. Local authorities acknowledged the AMCA as being in charge of issuing possession certificates (*títulos de posse*) and responsible for maintaining a register. Here, the AMCA's possession certificate gains some worth in defending one's plot. Notwithstanding, such 'outsourcing' of governmental tasks does little to avoid the fact that while a settlement's demographic dynamic and growth may demand ongoing intra-community sales, inhabitants remain in a fragile state of legal instability:

The only thing we can do is to collect everything that proves our land use for several years. Yet, we know that if they want to remove us, the authorities will have a hard time to begin legal proceedings against everyone, due to each and everybody's different legal situation. (Roberto, interview, 25 April 2015)

As Roberto explained, the appropriation of informality implies several practices that add to a communitarian defensive strategy. Some residents proved ownership through sale contracts with those who hold titles, while others could not. For some, the occupation of land can provide an opportunity to receive compensation in the event of removal. In any case, individual families bargained with representatives of the real estate developer for 'temporary use,' and some received written allowances to use the terrain for purposes ranging from farming to recycling trash and constructing residencies (Solange, interview, 25 April 2015). Such 'institutionalized' acting out of informality cements claims of belonging to a normative, yet admittedly unstable order, and envisages expectations of a formal system that is well connected to government officials.

The practice of doing informality – through the strategic appropriation and normalization of legal instability and related practices – is an encroaching form of resistance which, for many, is essential. Many residents were 'not in the condition' (Roberto, interview, 25 April 2015) to move to an MCMV project because the architectonic arrangement left no space for building for future generations, nor the chance to exercise working practices that sustain livelihoods. Nevertheless, the performed instability of the resettlement effectively produces spatial confinement. The urban poor must either continue in marginalized conditions to prove their conformity with informality, or move to a project with restrictive social architecture. The dilemma was best expressed by former community leader of Vila Autódromo, Inalva Brites:

We have shown all what we could to collaborate with the government, agreed to territorial limitations and partial removals. But the fact that the few families and their shacks are not accepted, not even where they do not disturb progress, makes us second-class citizens. (Inalva, interview, 22 April 2015)

Thus, this function of informality demonstrates the contingency of formal urbanization, which can be both a vehicle of self-defense as well as a governing tool to maintain legal instability. The narrative of progress that attempts to promote Rio de Janeiro's ascendance to a First World city by conveying 'informality' as a threat in the context of the Olympic Games is a particularistic appropriation of the signifier and a hegemonic operation to govern the urban poor.

Conclusions

This article has argued that informality acts as a signifier when mobilized in everyday social interactions. While I have shown that informality is appropriated in order to govern a process of territorial branding that results in spatial confinement, an analysis of its performativity is also conducive to overcoming the persistent use of urban informality as a security threat and as hampering the creation of a First World city. The three functions I have presented allow for a better understanding of informality as a constructed category whose meanings and effects depend on its appropriation by different societal groups. Owing to this methodological shift, informality should not be seen as neutrally opposed to planning but rather as a normative frame for antagonistic strategies of public and private actors.

Against the backdrop of urban reordering and its inherent narrative of progress, a hegemonic mobilization of informality justifies the spatial confinement of the urban poor. At the same time, such structurally and historically established forms of territorial stigmatization continue to be contested, leading to new alliances and political emancipation. Adding to this complexity, social distinction with regard to the signifier 'informality' is not only occurring between the different social classes but is also taking place within the social classes themselves. Spatial confinement impacts not only the livelihoods of the urban poor, but also upper-middle-class condominium residents who appropriate the signifier to defend their interests vis-a-vis the urban poor and real estate developers.

The multiple forms through which these dynamics of confinement correlate do not simply bring about diverse spatial forms – gated communities as well as social housing complexes – but also provide a stage for the political claims of the marginalized. This suggests that the urban poor are not being disconnected from the global economy but instead are agents in a global order of spatial confinement, hence turning on its head the stigma that informality conveys. Real estate developers, landowners, and urban upper-middle-class homeowners form a powerful coalition that is expanding spaces of exclusive residency. Meanwhile, the upper middle classes are also experiencing a form of marginalization through nontransparent land use and construction regulations. Middle-class homeowner associations, however, make use of their economic and political positions to denounce the real estate developers' actions as 'informal.' Rio's conflictive

south-western area continues to present an exemplary showcase of such controlled instability, where spatial confinement perpetuates the insecure social and legal status of urban poor settlements.

The narrative of urban progress is materialized as an architecture of social control. Through their design and administration, the social housing projects promise similarities to the condominiums of the upper middle classes. They portray life in a serviced apartment building as an opportunity of belonging to the nationally unifying cry for progress. Whereas for some recipients this is a welcome solution to their former precarious livelihoods, other settlement residents perceive such lifestyles as a loss of community values and personal opportunities. Therefore, resettlements destabilize the political, social, and economic fabric of marginalized communities, while the narrative of informality as a threat perpetuates historically established structures of marginalization.

As an attractive area for investors, the south-western expansion of Rio provides a stage for political struggles between heterogeneous claims and actors. On the one hand, the image of Rio de Janeiro as an Olympic City bolsters the claims of real estate developers to provide ordered urban development. On the other hand, growing international attention makes visible and effectively shapes the claims of the urban poor. The urban poor are both the 'others' in relation to which real estate developers, along with homeowner associations, accumulate social and symbolic capital, as well as political subjects that effectively articulate resistance to the hegemonic order. Far from being a disconnected homogeneous class of the dispossessed, the urban poor also aim for normative orders and associate themselves with a global process of intercity competition and its inherent practices of spatial confinement.

Nevertheless, the ongoing investment-motivated displacement of poorer groups and the intensification of class-based isolation and confinement represent an 'ethics of cohabitation' and, as a consequence, 'a politics in alliance' (Butler, 2015: 70ff.) less likely, as can be seen in the present round of social, economic, and political polarization in Brazil. As a welcome trigger for future thought, this suggests a further investigation of precaritization in the wake of politico-economic crises across class divisions and how the increasing societal polarization plays out on the (urban) ground in Rio de Janeiro, Latin America, and beyond.

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Notes

1. Urbanization of favelas, including the formalization of land ownership either granting titles to individuals or to whole communities, was the objective of 'Operação Mutirão' (Operation

- Collective Work), 'Cada Família Um Lote' (One Family One Plot) in the 1980s, the program Favela-Bairro (Favela Neighborhood), and Morar Carioca until the present.
2. Pacifying Police Units (Unidades de Polícia Pacificadora, UPP) have been deployed in Rio's favelas since 2008, with the aim of installing permanent police presence in these 'ungoverned areas' and thus breaking the cycle of violence of ongoing confrontations among gang fractions and the military police.
 3. The program Morar Carioca was implemented in 2010. It foresaw an upgrading of public spaces and growth control in a resettlement of residents living in particular risk areas from low-income communities.
 4. MCMV is financed by public banks (BNDES, Caixa Econômica Federal, and Banco do Brasil) and allocates an investment of 34 billion reais into social housing projects in the form of interest-less loans for households of low (5–10 min. salaries) and lowest (0–5) income sectors, with almost 50% of a total of 71,925 units provided for the lowest income sector.
 5. Since 2008, 19,000 inhabitants have been resettled within Rio de Janeiro, and another 40,000 face this threat. The Secretariat for Housing legitimizes such actions by qualifying an area as 'of public interest,' or as at risk of flooding and potentially harmful to the environment (Cardoso, 2013).
 6. According to the Brazilian City Statute of 2001 (Lei N° 10.257/2001), a collective right to property is granted to a low-income group after five consecutive years of residence.

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Author biography

Frank Müller holds a doctorate degree in Political Science from Freie Universität Berlin. He has taught and researched on urban housing, social inequalities, and security in Berlin, Amsterdam, Mexico City, and Rio de Janeiro. Currently he has a postdoctoral position at SECURCIT and the Center for Urban Studies, University of Amsterdam.

Résumé

L’informalité urbaine est traditionnellement associée aux populations pauvres des villes du Sud global. À partir du concept de performativité de Judith Butler et du cas particulier de Rio de Janeiro dans le contexte des jeux Olympiques de 2016, nous nous attachons dans cet article à conceptualiser l’informalité comme un signifiant et une catégorie relationnelle procédurale. Plus précisément, nous montrons comment des acteurs de différentes classes sociales ont pu employer le signifiant « informalité » pour (1) légitimer le confinement des populations marginalisées ; (2) justifier les efforts concertés de la classe moyenne supérieure pour protéger leurs résidences sécurisées refermées sur elles-mêmes ; et (3) justifier la formation de conflits et d’alliances entre habitants, activistes et chercheurs autour de l’ordre urbain. Cet article offre de nouveaux éclairages pour mieux comprendre le rapport entre informalité et confinement en examinant le rôle actif que les habitants des quartiers marginalisés ont joué dans la ville olympique.

Mots-clés

Confinement, informalité urbaine, logement urbain, performativité, Rio de Janeiro

Resumen

La informalidad urbana suele atribuirse a los individuos pobres que residen en las ciudades del Sur global. Basándose en el concepto de performatividad de Judith Butler y tomando el caso de Río de Janeiro en el contexto de los Juegos Olímpicos de 2016, este artículo conceptualiza la informalidad como un significante y una categoría procedimental y relacional. Específicamente, muestra cómo actores de diferentes clases sociales han empleado el significante de informalidad para (1) legitimar el confinamiento de las poblaciones marginadas; (2) justificar los esfuerzos organizados de la clase media alta para proteger sus comunidades “cerradas” en urbanizaciones; y (3) justificar la formación de conflictos y alianzas entre habitantes, activistas e investigadores en torno al orden urbano. Este artículo ofrece nuevas perspectivas para entender mejor la relación entre informalidad y confinamiento examinando el papel activo que asumen los habitantes de asentamientos marginados en la Ciudad Olímpica.

Palabras clave

Confinamiento, informalidad urbana, performatividad, Río de Janeiro, vivienda urbana