Forms of Informality: Morphology and Visibility of Informal Settlements

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Informal settlements are urban neighbourhoods or districts that develop and operate without the formal control of the state, co-existing but not synonymous with ‘squatter’ settlements and ‘slums’. The proliferation and resilience of such settlements has been phenomenal and half a century of state intervention has failed to halt their growth. They are so economically, spatially and socially integrated with their urban contexts that most developing cities are unsustainable without them, yet the desire to remove them persists and is linked to issues of urban imagery and place identity. In this paper we first analyze the predominant morphological types characterized by their typical infiltrations of the formal city. Primary among them are urban waterfronts and escarpments, but also the interstitial easements lining transport infrastructure and the deeper urban spaces behind formal streetwalls. From this necessarily simplified typology we proceed to open a series of questions about the ways in which the visibility and image of the informal sector play out within the formal gaze of the city. How do informal settlements emerge within different urban niches with different degrees of access and visibility? To what degree is the informal city invisible or imagined away? How do informal settlement types produce place identities? How does this socio-spatial assemblage mediate the politics of urban spectacle, place branding, upgrading and eviction? How do (and how can) informal settlers use or transform their relative visibility or invisibility? These questions will be explored through specific cases in South and Southeast Asian cities.

Over one billion people now live in ‘squatter’, ‘slum’ or ‘informal’ housing settlements globally, a population that is projected to grow to 1.4 billion by 2020 (UN-Habitat, 2006). The terms ‘squatter’, ‘slum’ and ‘informal’ are problematic and negative words, defined in terms of a lack: a squatter lacks land tenure; a slum variously lacks space, durability, water and sanitation; informality implies a lack of formal control over planning, design and construction. While it is easy to regard such settlements as unsustainable, they are the way in which one in every three people in cities sustains him or herself and they are the fastest growing form of new urban development. Any idea that such populations are marginal to the cities they occupy has long been disproven (Perlman, 1976) and most developing cities are economically unsustainable without them. Many such settlements have developed in situ over time into well-serviced neighbourhoods – no longer ‘slums’ and with varying levels of tenure and formality. The Indonesian kampung of Surabaya and Yogyakarta present many such situations. Yet the tendency to see such settlements as a problem to be fixed or erased has led to a situation where they are often relatively invisible within the urban spectacle and largely unstudied in terms of
While there is a high level of congruence between the meanings of slums, squatting and informal settlements, it is important to distinguish between them. Most informal settlements involve a range of rental, squatting and informal entitlements; tenure is often irregular and contested rather than strictly illegal (Jenkins, 2006, p. 94). A slum is defined by the UN as any dwelling with more than three people per room or without access to clean water, sanitation, security or durable shelter (UN-Habitat, 2006, p. 19) – yet many dwellings in informal settlements are not slums by this definition. While there is nothing new about informal urbanism, the proliferation of such settlements over the past 50 years has been driven by economic and technological change producing massive and sustained rural-to-urban migration globally. In most developing cities the surge of those attracted to the cities has not been matched by growth in formal-sector employment; in turn, the growth in both population and urban employment, whether formal or informal, has not been matched by the capacity of either the state or the formal market to provide affordable housing. Half a century of state intervention, variously including demolition, displacement and upgrading, has failed to halt the growth of informal settlements. It is a key premise here that the vast majority of informal settlements are now permanent and the task is one of sustainable in-situ development. A key hypothesis here is that the prospects for such development depend on a better understanding of the morphologies of informal settlements and the ways they are perceived and conceived within the urban field. There is no strong empirical literature on which to base a study such as this. The analysis that follows is based on considerable experience of the authors in Southeast Asian cities, supervision of research on informal settlements and interpretation of that portion of the literature that does include morphological analysis (Brillembourg and Klumpner, 2005; Evers and Korff, 2000; Huchzermeier and Karam, 2006).
seemingly limitless conditions of informal settlement to be confronted in cities. With few variations the dominant house type of informal urbanism in this plethora of urban conditions is room-by-room accretion, often in a contiguous assemblage that extends horizontally and vertically to about five or six storeys (figure 1). This is a process driven by the imperatives of poverty and the slow accumulation of scarce resources, seemingly regardless of whether the process is one of settling, inserting or attaching and regardless of the urban situation confronted. Construction materials are commonly recycled and range across plastic, timber, steel, concrete, canvas, rubber, bamboo and brick. There is a very broad range of room types and accretions that vary with culture, climate, density and geography. Our interest here is in the range of territorial types within which informality develops. These are characterized by a certain level of

Typology of Informal Settlements

There would seem to be three primary modes or processes of informal settlement growth – how settlements grow. The first is simply settling, as on unclaimed and often unbounded land as indigenous villages and towns have come about over millennia. Second is inserting, into the uninhabited, abandoned or leftover fragments of urban space. Third is attaching, as informal accretions or excrescences grow out of, or attach onto, the structures of the formal city. These processes of settling, inserting and attaching occur in a diversity of urban situations – unused land, urban infrastructure, edges to formal settlement, rustbelt districts. The outcome is the

Figure 1. Room-by-room accretions. (Photos: Kim Dovey)
marginality to the space of the formal city, often an interstitial space between the formal zones of urban space.

For our purposes here we suggest a typology of eight settlement types. Our use of the term ‘type’ is morphological rather than functional; they are typical urban conditions rather than building types. The types are generally independent of scale and they are not mutually exclusive nor, for that matter, are the modes of growth (settling, inserting, attaching) that underlie them. Such a typology is primarily a way of organizing our thinking rather than simply classifying places.

1. Districts

The most famous of urban slums are often those where informal settlements have grown to become large mixed-use districts incorporating major retail and industrial functions. Famous examples include Kibera (Nairobi), Tondo (Manila), Khlong Toei (Bangkok), Kampung Kaliasin (Surabaya) and Dharavi (Bombay) (figure 2). Often developed over a long period, such informal settlements cannot (or can no longer) be described as infiltrations or encroachments; they are often the site of major upgrading schemes where the prevailing informality becomes infiltrated by the formal city.

2. Waterfronts

These are settlements on marginal land between the formal city and the water whether river, canal, lake or harbour frontage (figure 3). This is often land that has previously been considered unsafe for settlement due to flooding or exposure. Many informal settlements in the wet tropical cities of Southeast Asia are of this type, lining the khlongs of Bangkok and the harbours and

Figure 2. Urban districts. (Photos: DigitalGlobe (upper left); GeoEye (upper right); Kim Dovey (lower))
Major urban infrastructure such as railways, freeways and large power or sewer lines often have easements or buffer zones that become major sites of informal encroachment (figure 5). Railway sidings are frequently settled in a manner that utilizes this easement and sometimes turns the railway line into a pedestrian street between trains. Buffer zones cleared for freeway or expressway construction may become available for encroachment and if the freeway is elevated then the space underneath can become accessible. Easement settlements can form large districts or can be inserted into the smallest fragments of leftover space.

3. Escarpments

Those parts of the urban topography considered too steep to build on are often appropriated for informal settlement. Frequently, this is the margin between the formal city and the mountains with land too steep for cars and which may also be subject to landslides. Examples here are most common in South America where the fielas of Rio de Janeiro and the squatters of Caracas are largely located on escarpments (figure 4).
5. Sidewalks

Sidewalk settlements emerge under conditions where public sidewalks are lined with blank walls or fences and are not used for access to adjacent properties (figure 6). The spatial framework generally leads to linear housing that is only one room deep but may be several storeys high. Domestic space thus occupies what remains of the sidewalk, which in turn becomes blocked to pedestrian access. Sidewalk settlements can be the most exposed and vulnerable of informal settlements, sometimes constructed from cardboard and plastic and folded away during the day.

6. Ahherences

This type is based on a principle of dependency of urban informality on a pre-existing formal framework – the formal construction becomes the armature for informal appropriation, which attaches onto or bursts through a formal public façade. Figure 7 shows a relatively formal three-storey streetscape in Bangkok with informal protrusions at ground level. The excrescences that accumulate on public housing blocks in...
insertions and excrescences combine to produce largely (but not entirely) informal settlements in the interstices of existing formal-sector buildings. The infilling of Beijing courtyard houses is one example (Zhang, 1997). Such developments are particularly common under conditions of a strong state (such as China and Vietnam) or where the visibility of informality is more politically sensitive.

7. Backstages

This type is where an informal settlement forms largely through attachment to or insertion between the existing buildings of the city under conditions where it is largely hidden from the public gaze of the formal city. This ‘backstage’ is an urban zone that becomes more informal the deeper one penetrates behind a relatively formal street frontage. At times the entry through the streetwall is nothing more than a half metre gap, beyond which the morphology of public streets gives way within a few metres to semi-private alleys where informal settlement becomes a relatively fluid and irregular morphology (figure 8). The informal

Hanoi or Santiago (also in figure 7) are other examples. While informal additions may also be internal, the impact on the city relates to informal intrusions onto public space. This type differs from the sidewalk type in that the source of informality lies in the occupation of the formal building.

8. Enclosures

This type is where informal settlements are physically contained within a formal shell of a large building, vacant lot or institutional compound. The defining characteristic here is that the formal boundary sets a limit to
the extension (and often the visibility) of the informal settlement. The occupation of cemeteries in Indonesia and Egypt are examples. The informal settlements of construction workers behind the hoardings of construction sites in Bangkok or Kuala Lumpur are further examples. Figure 9 shows both a former prison compound and port compound in Manila where informal urbanism is contained by substantial urban boundaries. The principle here is that the original shell becomes the bounding condition of informal appropriation even where the informal accretions are clearly visible.

Hybrids, Transformations and Ambiguities

We in no way suggest that the types outlined above are mutually exclusive or stable; rather they sketch a range of conditions that may help understand why informal
urbanism emerges where it does. We have developed this typology through a mix of literature review, fieldwork, analysis of maps and photographs, explorations on Google Earth and lengthy debate. There is no sense in which it is fixed or finished. Our sense was that while it is easy to identify a hundred types, a set of five to nine will be most useful in understanding the forces at play and that each must be identified by a different spatial diagram. Any such typology must acknowledge that informality is fluid and unstable; there are few clear boundaries in space and forms can be very dynamic over time. We suggest that seven of these eight types can be loosely grouped into three sets according to their morphological determinants: waterfronts and escarpments are mostly determined by urban topography; easements and sidewalks are dependent on trajectories of circulation and communication through the city; backstages, adherences and enclosures are all related to the mediation of public/private interfaces. These topographic, infrastructural and interface conditions are all subject to changes that lead to transformations in the informal settlements and to slippage from one category to another. With that proviso we suggest a typology of informality as illustrated in figure 10.

The distinctions outlined here are heuristic tools – nearly all informal settlements are hybrids. A waterfront is often an embankment or escarpment where the dangers of flooding and land slippage combine. Railway, freeway, water and power easements may be co-located with waterfronts or large informal districts. A strip of sidewalk urbanism may be adjacent to an escarpment or on the exterior of an enclosure. One settlement type may be
transformed or morphed into another. Figure 11 shows an urban district in Manila which has been partially demolished for street widening and then provided with a more formal street façade or ‘frontstage’ to clean up the imagery. Along some Bangkok canals and riverbanks a formal public pedestrian pathway has been added to contain encroachment and clean up the image (figure 11). In Bangkok the legitimating symbols of Nation-King-Religion often work to mask the slums (King, 2008b) – the settlement is still visible but is of a lower order of visibility relative to the spirit houses, flags and royal shrines (figure 12).

Many informal settlements are intentionally temporary, often linked to the construction industry where accommodation is permitted on a construction site for a particular period of time. Such settlements are formal at one level in that a part of the development site may be set aside for the purpose of enabling informal construction but also with provision for instant removal once formal construction is complete. Such settlements may be a variation of the enclosure type with a formally fenced compound. Temporary settlements can sometimes develop the resilience necessary to resist displacement. When economic collapse leaves buildings half constructed (as was the case after the 1997 Asian crisis) these can become shells as settlers colonize the interiors. Existing formal constructions can become the armature for informal accretions that are added horizontally or vertically.

Informal settlements may pre-date the formal city as when a village becomes
swallowed by a major city. The fishing villages incorporated into Bombay are of this kind as are many kampung in Indonesia; indeed Surabaya can be viewed as an accretion of kampung. Such settlements may become indistinguishable from entirely modern encroachments as the traditional morphology becomes redeveloped within the modern context of higher density through makeshift construction and recycled materials. The location of informal settlements may also be linked to protective institutional, religious or political power. In Thailand informal dwellings often cluster around Buddhist wat compounds (Dovey and Polakit, 2006) while communities lining canals may have an historic affiliation with the King. In Yogyakarta land traditionally belonging to the Sultan is considered to be safer from eviction.

As argued earlier, no settlement is ever completely formal or informal, the abiding condition is ambiguity. What is known as ‘squatting’ often occurs on land without clear cadastral maps or legitimate titles or where there are contested claims over land tenure and where squatting often becomes formal tenure over time (Evers and Korff, 2000). Especially anomalous is Kuala Lumpur’s informal settlement of Kampung Bahru, which enjoys, via constitutional guarantees, a more secure tenure than the corporate towers that surround it (King, 2008a). Many kinds of informal tenure emerge: ‘landlords’ charge rent on property for which they hold no title; land and houses are informally ‘bought’ and ‘sold’; agreements and titles may be ‘registered’ with community leaders. Political alliances often form between political parties and squatter communities who guarantee to deliver voting blocs in return for protection.

Figure 11. Formalizing the informal. (Photos: Kim Dovey)

Figure 12. Royal screens, Bangkok. (Photos: Ross King)
from eviction. Thus resident interests in security of tenure can be countered by those of landlords and politicians in keeping tenure ambiguous.

The responses of the state to urban informality include in-situ upgrading, on-site resettlement and eviction (with or without resettlement). Not all informal settlements are sustainable but it is clear that most are permanent parts of the urban economy and often incorporate significant levels of industry as well as housing. Forced eviction is generally coupled with demolition of the settlement and it may or may not involve compensation or resettlement. The reasons for forced eviction may include cleaning up the image of the city, clearing dangerous land such as flood plains or unstable hillsides, or clearing sites for new development. One such reason may be used as the cover for another. However, forced evictions attract both local and global media coverage and are often politically unpalatable. Resettlement schemes frequently involve relocation to cheaper land on the urban outskirts without access to employment. Such relocation can stimulate the development of more informal settlements as residents move back closer to employment. In many countries eviction has been largely replaced by coercive displacement, a process whereby residents are enticed or intimidated to move or to sell under conditions that are not in their interests (Durand-Lasserve, 2006). The granting or selling of individual land titles to squatters can become a form of coercive displacement akin to gentrification. When titles are granted in prime urban locations many former squatters sell their title to take the profit and move to informal settlements elsewhere (Huchzermeyer and Karam, 2006). Coercive displacement in developing cities has come to operate at a larger scale than forced evictions because it is more politically palatable. It can lead, however, to new forms of solidarity and resistance among threatened communities: Bangkok’s vast Khlong Toei slum is really a sprawling region of disconnected informal settlements where threats and coercion forged a new sense of identity, class awareness and political activism whose consequences continue to play out (King, forthcoming).

Visibility, Image and Brand

The urban types sketched above mediate the visibility of informal settlements within their particular cities. Some types, particularly escarpments, waterfronts and railway easements are particularly exposed. Yet relative to their population, many informal settlements remain deeply invisible even to those who live or pass nearby. The mass media plays a key role mediating public perceptions of slums. Bhan (2009) suggests that one result of the film ‘Slumdog Millionaire’ was a new understanding of the degree to which ‘our own cities are invisible to us’. Even when visible from a distance, informal settlements are often enclaves, as impenetrable to outsiders from a different social class as gated communities – they may indeed be informally gated and guarded. A key transformation that is taking place lies in the production of new sites for middle-class visibility of informal settlements. The high-rise buildings that attract informal settlements in their construction phase then produce a middle-class gaze across that landscape when they are completed as apartments or offices. Elevated railways, expressways and pedestrian links do likewise (figure 13). Bangkok’s Khlong Toei slums, largely impenetrable to outsiders yet overlooked by the high-end condominium towers of the Sukhumvit district, exemplify both such phenomena.

The image of the city is important to the state both politically and economically. Governments can be embarrassed by the image of informal settlements as signifiers of failure and a lack of law and order. Invisibility can protect informal residential and livelihood practices (including crime), and it enables the state to turn a blind eye. Informal settlements can disappear from
the cognitive map of those who allocate resources; settlers generally pay no land tax and are serviced accordingly. Settlements that are exposed can be targeted for eviction, particularly if the city is host to major tourist or political events or there is an excuse for road widening or flood control. Visibility can also attract upgrading schemes but the focus on image can lead to superficial or ad hoc approaches (Huchzermeyer and Karam, 2006).

Informal settlements generally have high levels of social capital due to a shared ethnicity, rural connections or the need for collective defence against eviction (Martin and Mathema, 2006). Yet they occupy urban zones with very low levels of symbolic capital – a stigmatized place identity that may also be linked to ethnicity. Invisibility both protects residents and enables the state to abrogate responsibility. Visibility puts them on the cognitive map, where they are often seen as a blight upon the city and state. Within this urban field there is considerable political capital available for politicians. When elections approach there can be a spurt of slum improvements (Jenkins, 2006), but politicians can also gain votes for cleaning up the city with forced evictions. The kampung improvement programme in Indonesia has often been driven by aesthetic imperatives among others, to create an image of civic order (Kusno, 2000, p. 129) and to win ‘beautiful city’ awards (Guinness, 2009).
The issue of visibility and image is complicated further by changes in the global context of urban development over recent decades. An increase in the flexibility and mobility of capital, increasing flows of tourists and the transition to an information economy have placed new economic importance on the city image as a brand (Kearns and Philo, 1993; Hubbard and Hall, 1998). The film ‘Entrapment’ caused a political furore in Kuala Lumpur in 1999 when it superimposed an image of a shanty town, allegedly in Melaka, over a tilt shot of the then new Petronas Towers, cutting across the state’s place branding agenda (Bunnell, 2004; King, 2008a, p. 47). Cities compete to attract flows of flexible capital and to establish themselves as global cities within these markets through the production of urban spectacle and iconography (Dovey, 2005; Klingmann, 2007; McNeill, 2008). The desire to create the conditions attractive to footloose multinational capital has led to increasingly entrepreneurial modes of governance together with an erosion of older models of rational, comprehensive and democratic urban planning. Themed and quasi-privatized developments proliferate as sites are created for airports, shopping malls, corporate towers, housing enclaves and deregulated development zones (Hannigan, 1998; Easterling, 2005). This rise of the image in urban development means that informal settlements now develop in an urban landscape and planning context that has itself become increasingly unsettled. New middle-class networks of high-rise buildings linked by elevated freeways and railways can rapidly increase the areas of visibility (viewsheds) of informal urbanism. Not only are images of informality seen as a blight on this entrepreneurial city, but many of the exposed waterfronts and escarpments occupied by informal settlements are prime sites for redevelopment.

The image of informality is not uniformly negative; while informal settlements seem chaotic and haphazard they have a socio-physical order that is often highly sophisticated, efficient and even picturesque (Pinches, 1994). This is mostly a rhizomatic order of accretion rather than hierarchical control; its sophistication comes from many years of trial and error and the incapacity of poverty to tolerate waste. The physical morphology is closely integrated with social networks, domestic economics and employment. There is a complex use of open space and innovative trade-offs between private and public space. The aesthetic issues here are highly sensitive, linked both to nostalgia for informal rural traditions and an aestheticization of poverty (Roy, 2004). The aesthetic potency of images of squatter settlements is often produced at a distance or from the air. It can be linked to the intensity of urban life produced at such densities, and to the dialectic juxtaposition of dream images with poverty (Buck-Morss, 1989). There are cases where urban imagery has helped to legitimate squatting by signifying permanence and social order (Peattie, 1992).

The visibility that can stimulate eviction can be turned to an asset in the transformation of place identity. One example is the riverbank/escarpment settlement of Gondolyu in Yogyakarta (Khudori, 2004), which won the Aga Khan Award for architecture with an upgrading project that used the exposure from an adjacent bridge to turn the image of the settlement from negative to positive. During the 1980s this project involved an upgrading of construction from cardboard and plastic to brick, concrete, timber and bamboo. It saved the community from eviction and involved a colourful practice of public artworks on the buildings (Khudori, 2004, pp. 44–60; Dovey and Raharjo, 2010). This settlement is highly visible from a major traffic artery and prior to redevelopment this visibility was a major reason for targeting the community for eviction. The focus on aesthetic considerations, particularly the painted artworks, has worked as a form of political legitimation turning visibility from a problem into an asset, producing a colourful
place identity as a badge of pride (figure 14). Over 20 years later this project remains a demonstration project for slum upgrading in Indonesia and the community is safe from eviction. However, the place identity remains as a ‘squatter’ settlement and economic development has not markedly changed. While the housing has been successfully upgraded, residents do not have legal tenure and many remain stuck in cycles of poverty (scavenging rubbish from the river). While such examples may be part of a genuine development process they may also be attempts to paste over deeper problems such as unemployment or ethnic conflict. Informal settlements are often identified by ethnicity and aligned with political and nationalist movements. They can also become locales of ethnic conflict as in the case of Kuala Lumpur’s Kampung Medan where rising affluence enabled informal Malay settlers to move ‘up market’, leasing their kampung houses to Indian households to the deep resentment of original and remaining Malay residents. Murders followed (King, 2008a). Such place identities are linked to their imagery and geared to a fraught geopolitical framework.

Beginning

This paper concludes with a beginning because we have hardly started on the kind of urban investigations we need to pursue with regard to the forms of informality. While research on the image of the city has burgeoned in the West there have been no such studies of the image of informal settlements. Slum and squatter settlements have been widely studied within legal,
political, anthropological, sociological and economic frameworks, yet the specifics of form and public image are generally seen as contextual or irrelevant. Some researchers have pointed out the systematic forgetting of informal settlements in the discourse and the maps (Shatkin, 2004; Roy, 2004) and others have written of the desire to cleanse the city (Appadurai, 2000). Many writers have engaged with the issue of informal urbanism globally (Turner, 1976; Davis, 2006; Payne, 1999; Neuwirth, 2006; Roy and Alsayyad, 2004) or with the urban symbolism of Southeast Asian cities (Nas, 1993; Askew, 2002; King, 2008a; Evers and Korff, 2000), yet with few exceptions (Pinches, 1994) there is very little research on the specific morphologies of informality.

There is no shortage of work proclaiming the creativity and productivity of informal settlements as a solution rather than a problem (Turner, 1976; De Soto, 2000; Brugman, 2009; Neuwirth, 2006; Brand, 2009) yet we do not have a sophisticated understanding of how informal urbanism works – empirically or theoretically. So what theoretical frameworks might we use to analyse the forms of urban informality? There are some important conceptual starting points from the history of urban studies. Lynch’s (1961) seminal work on the ‘image of the city’ established the importance of urban imagery and cognitive mapping in a manner that has stood the test of time. From this perspective informal settlements are ‘districts’ with a character and consistency largely established by their informality. The image of the informal city, however, is often found in the interstices of Lynch’s categories of ‘paths’, ‘edges’ and ‘landmarks’. Jameson’s (1991) call to pay more attention to cognitive mapping under conditions of global capitalism is also relevant here, together with more recent calls to understand and re-imagine a fragmented or splintered urbanism (Amin and Thrift, 2002; Graham and Marvin, 2001). Informal settlements cluster around the paths and edges of the modern city and, when visible, their imagery clashes with the landmarks of modernity and nationalism. Anderson’s (1983) insight about the nation as an ‘imagined community’ is also relevant here – the nation is often constructed and stabilized through urban imagery and representation; informal settlements never appear on stamps, coins or banknotes. The nation rides on the obligation to forget – to not see (Renan, 1947–1961).

Benjamin and Lacis were writing about early twentieth-century Naples, but it could have been informal settlements when they introduced the term ‘porosity’ into urban design discourse:

Building and action interpenetrate in the courtyards, arcades and stairways. In everything they preserve the scope to become a theatre of new, unforeseen constellations. The stamp of the definitive is avoided. No situation appears intended forever, no figure asserts its ‘thus and not otherwise’. This is how architecture, the most binding part of the communal rhythm, comes into being here… No one orients himself with house numbers… The inconspicuous door, often only a curtain, is the secret gate for the initiate … one can scarcely discern where building is still in progress and where dilapidation has already set in. For nothing is concluded. Porosity results … above all from the passion for improvisation… (Benjamin and Lacis, 1978, pp. 166–168)

Benjamin and Lacis were interested in the ways in which the city of poverty attracts and repels simultaneously. Not to be simply conflated with spatial permeability, porosity for Benjamin was a pre-modern condition characterized by interpenetrations between such categories as old/new, sacred/profane, public/private, interior/exterior, work/play and permanent/transient (Gilloch, 1996). This quality of porosity is above all productive and even liberating. It can be linked to the Deleuzian conception of ‘smooth’ space and rhizomic practices. By and large informality seeks the vacuums of urban space – the leftover, abject spaces and buffer zones; the unsafe, unused or unusable. Whether or not they are literally at the margins, most of the locations of informal settlements are
defined by a condition of being marginal to the instrumental functions of the formal city. Deleuzian thinking (with that of Guattari) deploys a range of twofold concepts that resonate with the informal/formal distinction that is a precept for this paper (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987). One of these twofold conceptions is the rhizome/tree, which contrasts the horizontal network connectivity of a rhizomic structure with tree-like systems organized hierarchically into stem and branches. Informal urbanism is rhizomic in that it migrates horizontally and emerges within the interstices of hierarchic order. We are reminded of Bataille’s identification of this sort of ‘radical horizontality’ with the very real limits to knowledge – the horizontal city of the informal is beyond the sort of knowledge that we bring to bear on the vertical-hierarchical city of formality (Bataille, 1992). This conceptual opposition of rhizome/tree has a parallel in smooth/striated space where the smooth is without the strict and stringent boundaries of striated space. Smoothness implies slipperiness and movement while striated space is where identities and practices have become stabilized in strictly bounded territories. The smooth and striated are not types of space so much as conceptual tools for thinking about urban ‘assemblages’ of interconnected parts where the focus is on connections, flows and dynamic process (DeLanda, 2006). Such an approach is particularly suited to an understanding of informal urbanism because relations between formal/informal urbanism map well onto these twofold Deleuzian concepts where the informal city can be seen as relatively rhizomic and smooth in contrast to the striations and hierarchies of the formal city.

This approach can also be related to theories of place as a socio-spatial assemblage (Dovey, 2010). The concept of the urban ‘assemblage’, like the concept of ‘place’, covers multiple scales from the single building to neighbourhood, city and nation. Informal settlements are part of much larger assemblages. These include the railways, freeways, pedestrian overpasses, high-rise apartments and office towers from which they are viewed; but also the internalized landscapes of middle-class retreat – the shopping malls, offices, hotels and housing enclaves in which informal settlers are often employed. It follows that analysis of informal settlements needs to proceed at multiple scales from the micro-scale of material flows, micro-financing and room-by-room accretion, to the macro scale of migrations and transnational property development. The well-known difficulty in ‘scaling-up’ slum redevelopment programmes may well be linked to a failure to address such multiple scales. Cities are at once places of bureaucracy, production, sensation and imagination (Amin and Thrift, 2002); we need to learn to connect these seemingly disparate dimensions of urban life. Part of the task here lies in excavating questions of epistemology (Foucault, 1980), of how the image of the city constructs the conditions of possibility for imagining different futures (King, 2008b).

One of the key questions is to understand the production of assemblages – the ways that parts become connected or disconnected, the ways that different and intersecting desires lead to integrations and segregations. Diagrams or maps of the forces producing an assemblage are important in this regard (Deleuze, 1988, p. 36; Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p. 141). For Deleuze such ‘diagrams’ are immanent in the sense that they emerge from within the socio-spatial field rather than being applied from some transcendent or external source. The typological diagrams attempted in figure 10 above can be seen in this regard.

Informal settlements are growing at a faster rate globally than any other form of urban development; since they cannot be demolished or replaced in total, the most realistic prospect is that such places will be redeveloped in situ by adapting the existing morphology. The visibility and imagery of informal settlements plays an important role
in the politics of eviction and displacement as well as the quest for tenure security. The success of in-situ upgrading programmes relies on a sophisticated understanding of context, visibility and image. We need a more detailed morphological analysis of informal settlements and the processes through which they emerge within the interstices of the city:

- To what degree are their spatial structures open or closed to through or passing traffic and how does this mediate visibility from the formal city?

- How are these districts, fragments, strips, compounds, escarpments and waterfronts seen and understood within the broader socio-spatial field of the formal city?

- What is their influence on the image of the city and how are they portrayed in the mass media?

- How does this visibility and morphology impact on the politics of upgrading and eviction/demolition?

- How does it mediate a larger political economy of urban spectacle and place marketing?

- Finally, what strategies are invoked by residents and authorities to transform the visibility or image of informal settlements?

REFERENCES


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