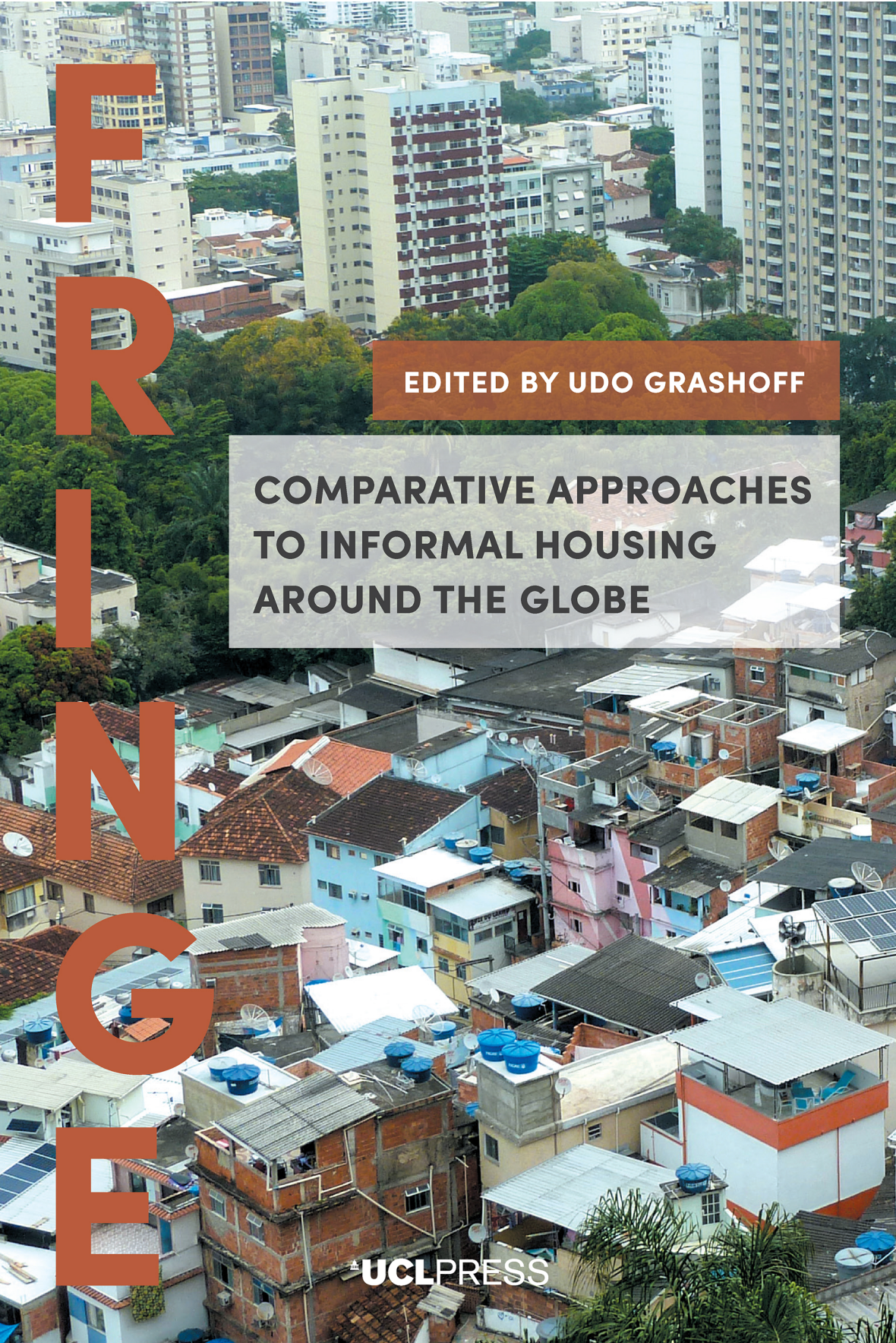


An aerial photograph of a city, likely in Latin America, showing a stark contrast between formal high-rise apartment buildings in the upper half and a dense, informal housing settlement in the lower half. The informal housing consists of multi-story brick buildings with various additions, balconies, and blue water tanks on the roofs. A large, semi-transparent white box containing the title is positioned in the center, and a dark orange banner with the editor's name is located just above it. The background is a mix of green trees and urban structures.

FRINGE

EDITED BY UDO GRASHOFF

**COMPARATIVE APPROACHES
TO INFORMAL HOUSING
AROUND THE GLOBE**

UCLPRESS

Comparative Approaches to Informal Housing Around the Globe

Edited by Udo Grashoff

 **UCL**PRESS

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Favela vs asphalt: Suggesting a new lens on Rio de Janeiro's favelas and formal city¹

Theresa Williamson

7.1 Favelas and the widespread view of informal settlements as a 'problem' to be 'solved'

With the original 'favela' still standing and turning 122 in 2019, Rio de Janeiro's informal settlements are some of the oldest – and most infamous – in the modern world. They also boast a tremendously rich history, in which their residents increasingly take pride and are committed to preserving, reflected in the rapid growth of favela-focused community museums (of which there are now 11) in Rio de Janeiro today.²

This vision of favelas as historic communities worthy of recognition and preservation starkly contrasts with the negative presumptions commonly made about them, whether by media, international development organisations, local governments, academics or others. Media outlets tend to be the most obvious culprits of such negativity, and are often interested only in sensationalist images – as one national US TV producer told me as he insisted over and over that I 'show him good TV' while proceeding to gobble up two days of our team's and partner communities' time. We helped him secure access to notable and even heroic interview subjects – known widely as telling victims of police violence – including the widow of the bricklayer Amarildo, whose story had gone viral, only three weeks after his brutal assassination by police. Yet, despite our best efforts, and despite the fact that the interview was conducted in the intimacy of the widow's home, the production team chose only to release a 20-minute segment focused solely on drug traffickers and

heavily featuring a dealer telling the interviewer ‘I could kill you at any moment’.³

At the other end of the spectrum, academics, though now attempting to be more balanced and rarely using stigmatising language about favelas, nonetheless typically see them, at their essence, as a ‘problem’ that needs to be ‘fixed’. That is, scholarly research still tends to focus on ‘fixing the problem’ of favelas, leaving little opportunity for a fresh look at these communities in terms of what they positively offer their residents, the city and society at large.

However, I would argue that poor understanding of favelas among international development organisations and local governments is the most damaging of all, because these are the institutions that actually have a real, direct impact on the policies and investments that affect residents, their development, their sense of security and their upward mobility. And it is precisely these two groups that most bang the drum of ‘addressing’ favelas by ‘formalising’ them. Peruvian economist Hernando de Soto is the most well-known influencer of formalisation policies that are heralded by international development institutions. Thanks to his 2000 book *The Mystery of Capital* and his broader work promoting land regularisation through individual titles, for two decades it has been widely presumed that the most efficient and effective single ‘solution’ to informal settlements is to formalise their land markets by giving residents the same land rights other landowners have.⁴ The basic argument is that, by giving settlers titles, they now have access to credit⁵ and tenure security, which enables them to invest in their homes and businesses, and break out of poverty. The underling logic here is: by formally recognising them through existing frameworks, they cease to be informal (informality being understood, at its essence, as the source of the problem), and therefore the ‘problem’ has now been solved. Quite simply, as residents now have the same rights as those in the formal city and across their broader culture, they are thus no longer marginalised.

7.2 The Paes administration: An example of the deceptive (and convenient) dichotomy of formal vs informal

Similarly, local officials in Rio regularly tout the goal of ‘addressing’ favelas by formalising them. This position has been most associated with the pro-business administration of pre-Olympic mayor Eduardo

Paes (2009–2016) who championed formalising endeavours – including electricity and cable provided by private utilities, policing provided by public agencies, or resident-run moto-taxi and van cooperatives. He argued that such policies were necessary for ‘the exercise of full citizenship’ by residents.⁶

But this was the same mayor who evicted 80,000 favela residents from their homes – most of whom had solid squatters’ rights claims congruent with Brazilian legislation but did not (yet) hold physical titles (though some did, and were nonetheless evicted).⁷ He, like others before him, used the fact that these communities were ‘informal’ to justify human rights violations, which mainly took place in lesser-known favelas (with less political power and largely hidden from the gaze of the press) in the city’s up-and-coming inner West Zone.

On the other side of the city, however, well-known and highly visible favelas in central areas (and consequently with high land values) were targeted by Paes with formalisation policies, the stated objective of which was to ‘integrate’ those communities into the formal city.⁸ Formalising these areas, however, led to a significant rise in the cost of living, which pushed long-time residents out,⁹ and even led to Rio’s beach-front South Zone favelas being recognised internationally as hubs of gentrification.¹⁰

In other words, Rio’s mayor ‘solved the problem’ of informality in one zone of the city (where it was politically viable to do so) by eradicating informal settlements¹¹ at great cost to those long-time communities,¹² while he solved the same ‘problem’ in another zone (where eviction would be politically unviable) by ‘formalising’ (regulating) its economy, which triggered a process of gentrification and market displacement. In the former case, he looked like the ‘bad guy’ to human rights organisations but appeared rational to those (a significant part of the population) who believe favelas are, by nature, illegal and therefore should be removed. In the latter case, he looked like the ‘good guy’ to most actors, for ‘fixing’ the problem of informality, even if the end result was the similar displacement of residents. Gentrification, after all, is often considered a ‘natural’ process.

At the peak of implementing these policies, Mayor Paes declared that ‘the city of the future integrates socially its citizens’, in his 2012 TED Talk.¹³ TED is a media organisation respected globally for producing impactful talks by acclaimed individuals whose ‘ideas are worth spreading’. His massive marketing budget was often used to promote an image of social integration based on what, in fact, was heavy-handed

formalisation imposed top-down.¹⁴ Paes' policy (dubbed 'Shock of Order') was crisply defined by Gareth Doherty and Moises Lino e Silva in a 2011 article:

The structural thinking behind the 'Shock of Order' rationale in Rio de Janeiro seems to be something like:

formal = order = security = generation = increased formal economic activity

*informal = disorder = insecurity = degeneration = decreased formal economic activity.*¹⁵

The authors go on to point out that, in a typical favela market, the 'Shock of Order' policy actually resulted in disorder. When the municipal guard descended on informal markets, one would see 'people running with DVDs, products scattered on the ground, tears, people congregating to watch, others rushing back home'. They reflected, 'This is the situation created by the "Shock of Order" itself'.

'During most other days', they contrasted, 'the market operated peacefully and, although it was often very crowded, no major incidents happened. This is to say that the so-called informal does not necessarily equate with disorder, in fact it carried its own order'.

Which brings us squarely to two questions: are 'formal' and 'informal' truly opposites? And is formality truly the goal? In the context of urban settlements, is informality really the absence of formality, whereby informality is the 'problem' that can simply be addressed through formalisation (of services, processes and institutions)? The presumption is that informal settlements are, by definition, lacking in 'formality', with the prefix 'in' rendering 'informal' the antonym of 'formal'. And the second presumption is that formality is the objective in and of itself. It is with this logic in mind that the 'Shock of Order' policy implemented formalisation as a path to increased formal economic activity, and presumed informality to be the road to decreased activity.

Doherty and Silva, however, with one simple example, make clear that things are not so straightforward: a single-pointed focus on regulating informal enterprises and formalisation policies may, in some cases, create greater disarray rather than order – and may consequently harm communities. It may even keep them from meeting basic needs.

My intention with the rest of this chapter is to explore this false and unhelpful dichotomy – and its negative ramifications – to open a path to more productive approaches to addressing the *real* challenges of informal settlements and building on their positive attributes.

7.3 Rio de Janeiro's particular brand of 'informality', and the conditions leading to it

Informal settlements in Rio are no longer 'slums' characterised primarily by squalor and insalubrious conditions, or 'shanty towns' characterised by precarious construction and makeshift housing. Over decades and generations, residents of Rio's favelas have, for the most part, superseded what were once minimal living conditions by investing as much as possible in their homes and neighbourhoods. Favelas are chronically underinvested and their infrastructure is not up to standard, but they are not, generally speaking, the desperate places the popular imagination (via the media) would have us believe them to be. And though, for the most part, they have been left in a state of neglect by the authorities throughout this same history, brief stints of investment by a handful of administrations mean that over 90 per cent of favela homes have basic infrastructure, including electricity, water and indoor plumbing (albeit, again, insufficient).

Nor are they any longer 'squatter communities', because favelas have acquired strong adverse possession rights. Brazil's 1988 constitution recognised the right to remain on land occupied for over five years – a right that applies in all of the nation's cities. This recognition came after pressure from the defiant housing movements that had formed over the previous nine decades since the first favela, today known as Morro da Providência, was settled.

Their adverse possession rights do not typically translate into physical land titles, however. Brazilian laws, often resulting from popular pressure, are quite favourable to favelas. But their implementation leaves much to be desired.¹⁶ This means that favelas live in a limbo state, in theory recognised as deserving of rights and investment, but not in practice – bringing us back to the terminology of informality, in this case our local variant.

In Rio de Janeiro, the local term for the serviced (typically middle- and upper-class) areas of the city is *asfalto* (literally, 'asphalt'), which is diametrically opposed to 'favela' in local parlance. Within the *carioca* (Rio denizen) worldview, using 'asphalt' as a surrogate for the formal city implies two things: formal = infrastructure investment; and infrastructure, particularly asphalt, is inherently good. By their very nature, *favelas*, since they are juxtaposed with *asfalto* (see Figure 7.1), are seen to be characterised by the absence of services, and their residents are conditioned to believe that investment in infrastructure, particularly asphalt, is an ideal to be sought, *no matter what*.

This is why, in 2012, the highly dedicated president of the residents' association representing Asa Branca (a West Zone community facing partial eviction for the widening of a road which already adequately served



Figure 7.1 *Favela and asfalto in Rio de Janeiro.* © Clara S. Rueprich.

his community) turned to me and said, ‘we can’t get in the way of progress!’ Crucially in this case, the road widening was arguably not in their interest at all, as the proposed project would take a local neighbourhood thoroughfare and turn it into a major road, bringing traffic in close range of community homes where children live. And this is also why, in 2011, residents of Pavão-Pavãozinho-Cantagalo, a grouping of three favelas in the city’s South Zone, initially went along with city plans (although they later contested them) to gut the heart of their community to make way for a dead-end road,¹⁷ which was claimed to be necessary by officials to bring ‘greater access’ to residents.¹⁸ In reality, this was simply a cynical move to reduce the population there. Similarly, it is typically assumed that Rocinha, Rio’s largest single favela, in its South Zone, would be better off removing families to open up space for roads and cable cars (which they, too, came to contest). But in all three cases, as with all favelas, the city has failed to provide sufficient access to sewage collection and treatment – an infrastructure investment that is truly in great demand by residents.

And it is similarly because of this blind faith in infrastructure and ‘formalising the informal’ as a ‘solution’ to favelas (presuming them to be a problem by their very nature) that, in the pre-Olympic years, favela organisers were thrilled to see five major government plans to address their problems. From the federal Growth Acceleration Program (PAC) – which

made massive infrastructure investments across Brazil, including in Rio's favelas – to the local Morar Carioca programme that promised to 'upgrade all favelas by 2020', and the Pacifying Police Units (UPP) programme to provide a 'humane' police presence in numerous favelas, residents were hopeful indeed.¹⁹

These programmes all shared the stated aim of formalising – that is, normalising – favela infrastructure in relation to the *asfalto*, or formal city. Residents were delighted with the potential for 'citizenship' that these programmes were touted to bring. This would happen because what was missing from favelas, it was claimed, were these formal investments and treatments, which were seen as paths towards equality vis-à-vis the formal city.

Yet, with the implementation of each of these programmes, numerous pre-existing qualities were undermined – community spaces, solidarity networks and affordability,²⁰ among others. And the true priorities of residents – typically health, education and sanitation – were *not* among the areas receiving investment (spoiler alert: investments all had one thing in common: they primarily benefited construction and property companies).

7.4 Re-examining the discourse around 'slums' and its analogues

Note that the common translations of favela referenced above – slum, shanty town or squatter settlement – all imply that such communities are (or should be) temporary in nature. They imply a level of precariousness – in infrastructure, building materials or legal standing – that must be overcome. Remember, in the case of Rio's favelas, that residents have superseded these conditions for the most part, simply by persisting over time and investing what they could, with occasional (albeit insufficient) investment and recognition from the authorities.

However, they have never become the *asfalto*. Even favelas where land titles have been won, or where the city government has opened administrative offices and published statements declaring the favelas' official switch to the status of *bairros* (formal neighbourhoods), have not become the *asfalto*.²¹ Even where millions were invested in infrastructure during the much-lauded Favela-Bairro programme of the 1990s (funded by the Inter-American Development Bank), which was tasked with transforming favelas into *bairros*, all are still referred to as favelas.

The binary of informal vs formal is thus fairly irrelevant in Rio. Because what is at stake is something deeper. Rio's favelas are a

territorial manifestation of the determination of Brazil's elite to maintain a slave-holding society's logic-structure within a democratic state, where they represent a small minority.²²

Rio de Janeiro is a city of deep divisions that has never, in its 454-year history, faced this issue head-on. Despite Brazil's slave trade lasting 60 per cent longer than that of the US, and the nation importing 10 times as many enslaved Africans as the US – descendants of whom account for 54 per cent of the nation's population today – Brazil has never instituted a policy of inward reflection, as is customary in countries that work to overcome such brutal legacies.²³ Rio de Janeiro alone received five times the number of enslaved Africans as the entire US, making it the largest port of entry for slaves in world history. Today, as a direct result of this history, and given Brazil's severe land inequality that resulted in a large population of freed slaves and their descendants moving to cities after abolition in 1888 (of which Rio at the time was the largest and most important), some 1,000 favelas shelter 24 per cent of the city's population. And most residents live in favelas that are over half a century old.

As long as it is convenient to the local elite to maintain them as such, favelas will remain 'informal' (in fact, or in the public discourse), at least until empowered residents shift the narrative and reality through popular action and pressure. Since only residents are perceived to benefit from such a shift, the change in mindset must come from within these communities. There are many examples of this changing tide today, and though growing and increasingly visible through the efforts of hundreds of community media collectives and other strategic groups, it remains a small wave, as the following example illustrates.

During the pre-Olympic build-up, innumerable residents of favelas were convinced to move to public housing condominiums up to two hours away from their communities of origin, thanks to the societal assumption that their neighbourhoods are of no value and that condominiums provide the ideal lifestyle.²⁴ One favela resident, a woman who had just proudly told me how she, her husband and their two adult daughters had been investing in their home for 15 years and had, finally, 'finished' it, then proceeded to inform me that, if she were given the opportunity to move to a gated condominium, she would take it. Confused, I asked why. She replied, 'I can't stand the way those people in the *asfalto* look at us [favela residents]'. I then prodded: 'What if they didn't see you that way?' She quickly cut me off and said, 'Then I'd never move!'

There is thus an urgent need to drop the conditioned discourses. Rather than view favelas as informal places characterised by what they *lack* (formality), I argue it is more productive to look at the actual

neighbourhoods reflected in this discourse, and compare *them*. If they are characterised by informality, then, why are favelas still considered favelas (with the associated negative connotations) when investments and titles are granted? And if they are so squalid, why do many residents, once acquiring the means to leave, prefer to stay?²⁵

7.5 Two different ways of life and how they address human needs

At least eight clear differences exist between the logic-structures exhibited by Rio's informal and formal settlements, as [Table 7.1](#) indicates.

Table 7.1: Rio de Janeiro: A comparison of formal vs informal settlements.

Aspect of comparison	Formal settlements	Informal settlements
Complexity	Regulation limits complexity, so formal neighbourhoods are inherently less complex internally and less diverse in comparison to one another. Less complexity means quicker deciphering and greater comprehension or predictability of a given place by outsiders, and thus helps diffuse fear across space within a city.	Lack of regulation leads to greater complexity, with complexity increasing over time as long as a community remains unregulated (whether by informal internal or formal external forces). Two informal neighbourhoods in Rio will be governed by their own local conditions, which may result in commonalities that stem from their similarly organic systems of development, but ultimately yield greater diversity in relation to one another as compared to the diversity of formal settlements. The greater complexity (which naturally leads to reduced decipherability by outsiders) may result in a sense of fear of the unknown by outsiders. On the other hand, it may result in a deeper sense of belonging among locals who are uniquely intimate with a given community's complexity.

(Continued)

Table 7.1 (Continued)

Aspect of comparison	Formal settlements	Informal settlements
Market entry	Bureaucratic and financial barriers to entry into the formal market. To start or maintain a formal business, one must meet strict and expensive government-imposed requirements.	Informal businesses can exist without much impediment, and if problems arise, those with strong relationships can use them to ease issues. Barriers can thus be removed or attenuated through relationships.
Urban planning	In theory, the formal city is organised through centralised master planning. In practice, in Rio, however, privilege-based master planning dominates (i.e. for the most part new projects) are developed or influenced by elite interests.	In favelas, urban planning takes place through adaptive, iterative planning characterised by urbanistic freedom responding to present needs and based on the creative use of limited resources. At times, planning is coordinated by resident groups – pre-planned and collectively executed.
Architectural typologies	In the formal city, there is a large number of possible architectural typologies, but nonetheless these are fairly pre-set and meet strict building regulations. The scale of constructed units is limited by zoning rules, not by technology. The tendency is to build vertically as much as possible, to maximise financial investment. Culturally, there is a high preference for high-security vertical condominiums.	In favelas, typologies are entirely flexible, though constrained and adapted to the conditions of the territory (e.g. terrain, substrate). Spaces are often put to the most intense use possible, with shelter being the primary need addressed, thus resulting in high density. The scale of construction is limited by what can be done in terms of finances and what can be done by human hand, thus resulting in low-rise developments.

(Continued)

Table 7.1 (Continued)

Aspect of comparison	Formal settlements	Informal settlements
Critical services	Virtually all services and exchanges are monetised or provided by public agencies.	Many necessary services, including public services, are demonetised and provided through mutual support or self-build (e.g. child care). In some cases, utilities are siphoned (e.g. electricity, water, cable). Still others (due to public policy failures and lapses) can lead to pernicious actors taking advantage of residents' needs (particularly in matters of security).
Relationship with neighbours	Logic of privacy, with individual and family interests dominating.	Logic of proximity, with strong solidarity networks dominating. This results in a strong sense of community and, historically, a high degree of collective action.
Addressing challenges	Formal means to fix and address challenges that surface (e.g. legal representation, hiring of a registered plumber).	Creative responses to challenges, 'hacks' (in Portuguese, <i>gambiarra</i>) (e.g. tinkering with existing materials to mend infrastructure, informal channels for dispute resolution).
Economic coordination ²⁶	The market, then the state, coordinate economic activity.	Necessity, then the market, coordinate economic activity.

Note: Original observations compiled by the author and generations of teams at Catalytic Communities, via observations at over 200 favelas, community resident interviews, dialogues with researcher–collaborators and relevant inferences from connected fields, compiled between 2000 and 2019.

Note that there is no subjective 'good' or 'bad' behind any of the items listed in [Table 7.1](#). However, it is easy to identify various aspects describing the logic-structure of favelas as helpful for reducing or attenuating the most severe consequences of (financial) poverty. That is, in various cases, residents of informal settlements do not need to shoulder significant financial costs to achieve a positive outcome, such as their ability to exercise entrepreneurship, guarantee shelter, repair infrastructures, or address basic services. The removal of bureaucratic hurdles and the ability to solve problems through mutual support, for example, are both

characteristics of informal systems that enable residents to exercise control over their outcomes, even in the absence of money.

Psychologist Abraham Maslow depicted human needs in the form of a pyramid, starting with our most basic (physiological) needs at the bottom – such as the need for air, water, food and shelter. Once these fundamental needs are met, moving up the pyramid, the second level represents our need for safety and security needs, including property; the third level refers to our need for love and a sense of social belonging; and the fourth relates to our need for self-esteem. At the top of the hierarchy is the human need for self-actualisation. Thus, from the perspective of human need, we should separate out the very basic need for shelter from the secondary need for property (particularly immovable property – that is, land and housing). We could also go on to discuss whether the possession of property really is a human need, or whether the actual, underlying need is for safety in land tenure, which can arguably be better afforded through other instruments such as Community Land Trusts,²⁷ or as is done in traditional and indigenous cultures around the world.²⁸

These and other assumptions may not ring true for residents of informal communities where a strong sense of togetherness and the ability to respond creatively to need may be an intrinsic quality in their lives. Informal settlements and informal ways of being in the world offer people in precarious situations flexibility to meet their most basic needs even more effectively than they would be able to if they were equally poor, but constrained to formal systems. They can also produce greater creativity and resilience in communities that depend on these qualities to adapt to difficult circumstances and make ends meet.

Many of the assets produced in favelas are generated through the practice of *commoning*. This is a social process whereby individuals benefit conjointly from combining forces and working together. It is associated with the pooling of resources by individuals, with the goal of maximising advantage while reducing risk to all those who participate. In favelas, the pooling of human labour is the most frequent commoning strategy. The traditional *mutirão*, or collective action event – whereby residents set aside time to help a neighbour build a room or add a rooftop slab, or work together to build a ping pong table or a public square – is largely responsible for any early favela development and is also commonly found well into a community's history.

Each informal settlement develops in its own unique way. Over generations, residents have built up their homes and communities, brick-by-brick, often struggling against adverse circumstances, and as a result adapting to those circumstances in creative ways. Favela homes therefore tend to be highly efficient, taking advantage of every square inch,

producing rooms of intense use, such as bedrooms, leisure spaces, rental units, shops and entranceways that double as storage spaces. For example, the *laje*, or rooftop, can be developed into a rental unit, sold, used for family events, for sunbathing, drying clothes or barbecues, or it can be rented out to tourists. Without externally imposed rules and investment, in some cases a single community leader can determine a whole community's future, for better or worse. The environment changes week-to-week, with new construction, opportunities, *gambiarra* and *mutirão*. These latter words are part of the favela vernacular, meaning a quick-fix DIY project and collective action, respectively. Every visit to a given community is distinct from the last.

In this way, each favela evolves as a unique and deeply interwoven ecosystem.

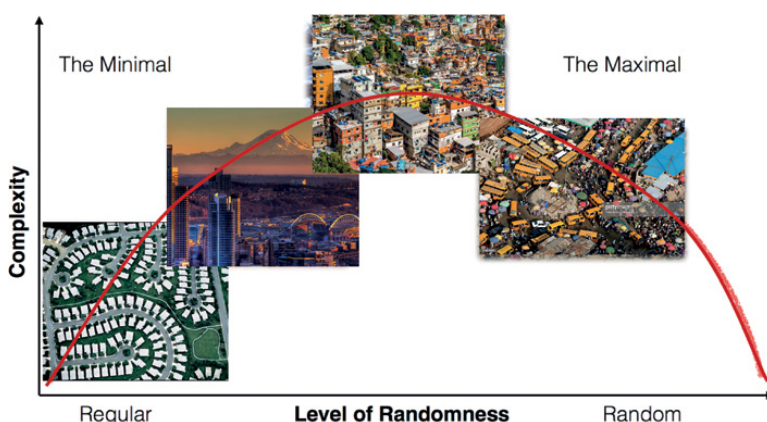


Figure 7.2 Randomness and complexity in human urban ecosystems. Produced by Theresa Williamson as comparison with diagrams on complexity by David Krakauer of the Santa Fe Institute.

Figure 7.2 is my adaptation of David Krakauer's representation of the positive influence of increasing randomness (that is, low imposition of rules and regulations and increasing diversity) in producing the most complexity (adaptive, diverse and resilient systems). It illustrates the value of increasing complexity in human urban ecosystems, and how the very nature of informal settlements (or at least those that find a way to self-regulate when they get to the 'sweet spot') can be seen as beneficial to human resilience and urban development. The 'sweet spot' is where complexity is maximised before too much randomness, as Krakauer calls it, leads to dysfunctional outcomes.²⁹

All varieties and levels of complexity can be found within, and across, the communities of Rio de Janeiro's 1,000-plus settlements. In long-established communities with large-scale growth and little regulation, daily changes, personalities and conditions over decades have led to incredibly complex human ecosystems. In younger, more internally coordinated or smaller communities, the result may be a high-level comprehensibility and liveability palpable even to outsiders on a first visit.

Due to decades of developing with little outside regulation, there are possibly too many factors at play for any top-down universal policy to be effective at improving residents' lives without undermining community assets,³⁰ unless that policy builds in extraordinary community involvement and room for flexible implementation based on community needs.

7.6 A pragmatic 'middle way' solution juxtaposed with the formal vs informal binary

In the case of Rio's favelas, among the documented (for the most part) non-economic assets are: socio-cultural assets, such as cultural output, sociability, atmosphere of play, sense of community and collective action; and urbanistic and economic qualities such as strong community ties,³¹ location, affordable housing in central areas, low-cost, flexible and need-based design, pedestrian-friendly design, and a high rate of entrepreneurship.³² There is nothing objectively good or bad about Rio de Janeiro's favelas. The four characteristics they all share – as neighbourhoods (1) that develop out of an unmet need for affordable housing; (2) with no outside regulation; (3) established by their residents; and (4) evolving based on local culture and circumstance, and their access to resources such as jobs and leadership – produce widely diverse (neither good nor bad) results. Framed another way, favelas are (1) affordable; (2) informal; (3) self-built; and (4) unique.

Approaching and measuring favelas' values strictly through formal approaches, which rely heavily on monetisation as the proxy for value, will inevitably leave out significant non-monetary assets. Measuring attributes financially is not only difficult to do (perhaps impossible), but potentially counter-productive even in cases where it is possible. That is because, at the heart of the logic-structure of 'favelas that work' (those in the 'sweet spot' of complexity) is the practice of effective commoning.³³

Perhaps, then, the most productive response to these settlements' challenges is not in shifting them towards the typical market-heavy and

externally regulated ways that formal settlements operate. Perhaps the optimum response lies in helping those that have reached the 'sweet spot' of complexity to remain there, by producing and instituting new, *appropriate* formalising tools that allow communities to officially self-regulate. That way, when effectively developed through commoning and the accumulation of non-economic assets, communities can be formally recognised in ways that maintain and strengthen those assets while providing them with the recognition and power necessary to institute or advocate for the actual improvements they need.

The question then becomes: how can this be done through formal institutions in a way that does not inherently cause the dissolution of these very non-monetisable attributes? To provide a solid and verified example of such a policy, I will briefly describe the case of the Caño Martín Peña Community Land Trust of San Juan, Puerto Rico,³⁴ which is serving as a model for favela organisers, housing advocates and officials in Rio de Janeiro today. Rather than opt for individual land titles as the stereotypical path to formalising and integrating their settlements in the broader city,³⁵ residents there collectively opted to be titled as a Community Land Trust (CLT). This move gives residents surface and building rights, while the land itself belongs to the community for perpetuity. The CLT comprises residents (and allies voted in by residents), whose job is to manage the community's land for perpetuity. The system allows families to own their homes and buy and sell them, inherit them and so on. But, since the land value is removed from the equation, speculators can neither access the land, nor are they interested in acquiring properties since the land underneath is not included. And because the community now collectively owns a huge swath of land in downtown San Juan, they are now among the city's largest landowners, resulting in a shift in power whereby the community can much more effectively advocate for improvements.

The result is a win-win. Residents are now formally recognised as owners (thus enjoying the qualities of formal systems, namely their being sanctioned and legally recognised, and ensuring critical services), while they own the land *collectively* (thus preserving the qualities that were developed through the years of informality, namely affordability, a preserved sense of belonging, solidarity and community ties, and flexible, community-determined planning).

The CLT model is just one example. Other common-sense approaches to addressing the formal vs informal binary in ways that confer the qualities of formal systems without losing the attributes of informality need to be developed, not only in developing contexts, but in

cities around the world. We desperately need a middle way between the over-planned and the under-planned that promotes creativity, inclusion, diversity, spontaneity and resilience while guaranteeing safety and promoting sustainable development.

7.7 Conclusion

These reflections on the favelas of Rio de Janeiro lead us to contemplate informal settlements through a new lens. Rather than inherently constituting a problem – due to their initial formation through illegal occupation, their uncoordinated development patterns, their potential for exploitation by criminals and so on – these settlements can just as easily become productive, vibrant, unique and exciting sites of cultural production and social well-being. And this is not *despite* their informal nature – but *because of* that nature.

What we term ‘informal settlements’ are characterised by a logic-structure inherent to them, and not, as is often assumed, by the absence of formal structures. And this logic-structure, which is based on, and confers, a particular way of life, brings with it a number of benefits to residents, particularly those with limited financial means – benefits that can lead to consolidated communities enjoying immense qualities that have been built over time.

Even though they lead to the challenges with which we are familiar (and which must be addressed to ensure their equitable and sustainable development), consolidated informal settlements – those that have established themselves over time with significant assets as recognised by residents – are notable for a population that seeks to stay put and improve what they have, rather than leave, when given the chance.

The survival needs met by informal settlements constitute the primary reason for their proliferation historically. This is no doubt why, despite over a century of policies to ‘eradicate slums’, the United Nations (UN) predicts that some 48 per cent of humanity will live in informal urban settlements by 2050.³⁶

Because of the informal, unregulated nature of favelas, they only grow in complexity day by day. This complexity will only be attenuated and contained when, and if, settlements engage in a community-coordinated or externally imposed regulatory process. It is thus essential that we nuance our understanding of such settlements and shift our lens to recognise and build on their assets, addressing their challenges from the springboard of those assets, rather than continuing with policies of

dismissal, ‘integration’, or ‘formalisation’ that disregard (and lead to the loss of) community qualities.

Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) is one exemplary tool that needs to be instituted, I believe, as core policy in working with established and historical informal settlements like those in Rio. It offers a practical approach to development whereby community assets are framed as the foundation from which challenges can be addressed, rather than solutions assumed to be located outside a community because it is deemed deficient.³⁷

If we first shift our perspective, and then seek out policy options like CLTs and approaches such as ABCD, we are more likely to tackle the *real* challenges posed by informal development, while recognising all that their residents have suffered and achieved over time.³⁸ The fact is I strongly believe that, until we understand the underlying nature of informal settlements, their qualities and their limitations, and compare this on an equal footing with the underlying nature, qualities and limitations of formal settlements, we will not be able to effectively improve the former without eroding their assets and qualities. And, perhaps equally importantly, we will fail to realise the potential of drawing on the qualities of informality in formal environments. That is, informal settlements have a lot to teach us about how to balance the formal and informal in our cities.

For upgrading to effectively take place, then, building on favelas’ natural qualities without compromising their assets – and thereby ultimately providing a much greater depth and variety of human urban experiences and options – this systematisation and recognition must happen first. Some cities in Latin America, for example, are making a mad push to upgrade their informal settlements and bring them into the formal realm, on the assumption this is inherently ‘better’ than what they had before. There is insufficient understanding of the innately different logic-structure that underlies an informal settlement, and what inhabitants may be losing in this process. I hope this thought-piece helps push forward an urgent discussion.

Notes

1. This chapter serves to address the debate on urban informality vs formality by compiling an assortment of anecdotes and research findings from the 19 years’ work I have done as an urban planner and founder and Executive Director of Catalytic Communities, an NGO working alongside thousands of favela organisers in hundreds of Rio de Janeiro favelas.
2. Gitanjali Patel, Museums of Counternarratives and Resistance, Part 2: A New Kind of Museum #MuseumWeek2018, *RioOnWatch*, 15 May 2019, last accessed 9 October 2019, <http://www.rioonwatch.org/?p=43330>.

3. 'War for Paradise', *Nightline*, 15 October 2013, last accessed 9 October 2019, <https://abcnews.go.com/Nightline/video/war-paradise-inside-rios-violent-drug-gangs-20582974>.
4. Simplistic applications of this model do not take into account the complexity of informal housing markets, where, for example, 'gradual increases in *de facto* tenure security often precede and ultimately lead to legal tenure security', among other trends (Jean-Louis Van Gelder, 'What Tenure Security? The Case for a Tripartite View', *Land Use Policy* 27, no. 2 (2010): 449–56).
5. Though even this common assertion is questionable, as shown in a 'natural experiment' on the outskirts of Buenos Aires, where some squatters in 1984 were given title and improved their livelihoods subsequently, but notably *not* due to access to credit: Sebastian Galiani and Ernesto Schargrotsky, 'Property Rights for the Poor: Effects of Land Titling', *Journal of Public Economics* 94, no. 9/10 (2010): 700–29.
6. Ricarda Lucília Domingues Tavares, 'Intenções e ações em torno dos programas UPP e Morar Carioca', *Cadernos do Desenvolvimento Fluminense* 11 (2016): 107.
7. World Cup and Olympics Popular Committee of Rio de Janeiro, *Rio 2016 Olympics: The Exclusion Games – Mega-Events and Human Rights Violations in Rio de Janeiro Dossier* (November 2015), last accessed 9 October 2019, https://issuu.com/mantelli/docs/dossiecomiterio2015_eng_issuu.
8. Ricarda Lucília Domingues Tavares, 'Intenções e ações em torno dos programas UPP e Morar Carioca', *Cadernos do Desenvolvimento Fluminense* 11 (2016): 107.
9. Sabrina Ost and Sonia Fleury, 'O Mercado Sobe o Morro: A Cidadania Desce? Efeitos Socioeconômicos da Pacificação no Santa Marta', *Dados: Revista de Ciências Sociais* 56, no. 3 (2013): 660–61.
10. Jo Griffin, 'Olympic exclusion zone: the gentrification of a Rio favela', *The Guardian*, 15 June 2016, last accessed 9 October 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2016/jun/15/rio-olympics-exclusion-zone-gentrification-favela-babilonia>.
11. Alexandre Magalhães, "'A remoção foi satanizada, mas não deveria": O retorno da remoção como forma de intervenção estatal nas favelas do Rio de Janeiro', *DILEMAS: Revista de Estudos de Conflito e Controle Social* 9, no. 2 (2016): 293–315.
12. 'While the informal framework ha(d) proved fairly efficient at managing everyday life in the favelas, the large-scale removals that the government ha(d) implemented in Rio de Janeiro in preparation for the 2014 FIFA World Cup and 2016 Olympic Games ... upset the balance' (Gregory Dolin and Irina D. Manta, 'Parallel State', *Cardozo Law Review* 38, no. 6 (2017): 2083–140).
13. Eduardo Paes, 'The 4 commandments of cities', *TED*, February 2012, last accessed 9 October 2019, https://www.ted.com/talks/eduardo_paes_the_4_commandments_of_cities?language=en#t-706824.
14. Cerianne Robertson, 'A Close Look at the International Awards and Recognition of the Olympic City', *RioOnWatch*, 27 April 2016, last accessed 9 October 2019, <http://www.rioonwatch.org/?p=28309>.
15. Gareth Doherty and Moises Lino e Silva, 'Formally Informal: Daily Life and the Shock of Order in a Brazilian Favela', *Built Environment* 37, no. 1 (2011): 30–41.
16. Patrick Ashcroft, 'Two Centuries of Conning the "British": The History of the Expression "É Para Inglês Ver," or "It's for the English to See" and Its Modern Offshoots', *RioOnWatch*, 28 May 2015, last accessed 9 October 2019, <http://www.rioonwatch.org/?p=21847>.
17. 'Estado inicia obras em ruas do Pavão-Pavãozinho e Cantagalo', *Jornal do Brasil*, 5 March 2013, last accessed 24 October 2019, https://www.jb.com.br/index.php?id=/acervo/materia.php&cd_materia=661728&dinamico=1&preview=1.
18. Juliana Blasi Cunha, 'Regularização urbanística e fundiária em uma favela da cidade do Rio de Janeiro: Conflitos, percepções e práticas em jogo no processo', *DILEMAS: Revista de Estudos de Conflito e Controle Social* 5, no. 3 (2012): 483–511.
19. Marcelo Baumann Burgos, Luiz Fernando Almeida Pereira, Mariana Cavalcanti, Mario Brum and Mauro Amoroso, 'O Efeito UPP na Percepção dos Moradores das Favelas', *Desigualdade e Diversidade – Revista de Ciências Sociais da PUC-Rio* 11 (2011): 49–98.
20. Though not universal, many of these qualities are frequently noted among informal settlements, particularly affordability, which is the main driver in their creation. Informal housing around the world is initially more affordable than formal options (though, throughout a home's history with regular rebuilding, this is not so clear). For a comparative example of informal versus formal housing delivery, see David E. Dowall, 'Comparing Karachi's Informal and Formal Housing Delivery Systems', *Cities* 8, no. 3 (1991): 217–27.

21. Juliana Blasi Cunha, 'Regularização urbanística e fundiária em uma favela da cidade do Rio de Janeiro: Conflitos, percepções e práticas em jogo no processo', *DILEMAS: Revista de Estudos de Conflito e Controle Social* 5, no. 3 (2012): 489.
22. Rafael Soares Gonçalves, 'The Informal Rental Market in the Favelas of Rio de Janeiro and Its Regulation from a Historical Perspective', *Revue Tiers Monde* 206 (2011): 21–36. In this text, Gonçalves crisply begins (21): 'The informal nature of access to urban land and the development of self-built housing have no doubt been key factors in keeping labor costs in Brazil—and in Rio de Janeiro in particular—as low as possible. The *favelas* have always been associated with illegality, which historically has justified a lack of public investment in these urban areas. This state of affairs has been compounded by clientelist practices, and the public authorities' tolerance for the formation and spread of these areas has become a kind of patronage arrangement, albeit without any *de facto* recognition of the situation. The authorities have maintained—or even cultivated—the temporary and precarious nature of the *favelas* by prohibiting all permanent construction or the connection of houses to the official public electricity or water grids. These conditions ensured that the *favelas* could be eradicated at any time.'
23. Examples include post-war Germany, post-dictatorship Chile, post-apartheid South Africa, and post-Jim Crow United States.
24. In the meantime, even in Chile – seen as Latin America's golden child of relocation to well-designed public housing – researchers have found, at least in one case, that 'through a massive program of investment in subsidized housing, more than a million Chileans have moved out from slums ... and become property owners. [However] ... youth violence, drug trafficking, and other social maladies are increasing in many neighborhoods. It appears that home ownership has not been enough to overcome marginality and disintegration. Moreover, in some cases, moving to subsidized housing projects contributes to increased social problems' (90). The same author later explains that 'segregation may explain some of the differences, but more complex features are critical, including issues of stigmatization, origin of the new home owners, residents' values and expectations, and the degree of social and territorial control they exercise over the territory' (114). From Rodrigo Salcedo, 'The Last Slum: Moving from Illegal Settlements to Subsidized Home Ownership in Chile', *Urban Affairs Review* 46, no. 1 (2010): 90–118.
25. Sukari Ivester, 'Removal, Resistance and the Right to the Olympic City: The Case of Vila Autódromo in Rio de Janeiro', *Journal of Urban Affairs* 39, no. 7 (2017): 970–85.
26. This analysis of economic coordination refers to Pedro Abramo's work, which I will not enter into in this chapter, but which I have included for those wishing to dig deeper. Pedro Abramo, ed., *Favela e mercado informal: a nova porta de entrada dos pobres nas cidades brasileiras* (Porto Alegre: Associação Nacional de Tecnologia do Ambiente Construído, 2009), last accessed 1 October 2019, https://issuu.com/habitare/docs/colecao_10.
27. Theresa D. Williamson, 'The Favela Community Land Trust: A Sustainable Housing Model for the Global South', in *Critical Care: Architecture and Urbanism for a Broken Planet*, ed. Angelika Fitz and Elke Krasny (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2019).
28. Typically, in developing countries, low-income people's concern with property rights is due to their concern that they will lose their homes, as the Property Rights Index (PRIndex) measures. Land Alliance, *Building a Secure Future: Perceptions of Property Rights in India* (Washington, DC: Land Alliance, 2016), last accessed 14 October 2019, <https://landportal.org/library/resources/building-secure-future-perceptions-property-rights-india>.
29. David Krakauer is president of the Santa Fe Institute, dedicated to studying complexity: '[Complex systems] are adaptive, interacting, many-body systems that include populations of cells, societies, economies, cities, human cultures, and technological networks – all phenomena with long histories and adaptive components, and they have a tendency to change as soon as we have come to understand them'. Krakauer goes on to say that 'many of our most pressing challenges and failures in the 21st century derive from an underestimation of complexity'. From David Krakauer, 'Complexity: Worlds Hidden in Plain Sight', *Medium*, 5 April 2019, last accessed 22 August 2019, <https://medium.com/@sfscience/complexity-worlds-hidden-in-plain-sight-44ec16d6f939>.
30. By *assets*, here, I am referring primarily to non-economic assets.
31. In 'The Strength of Weak Ties', *American Journal of Sociology* 78, no. 6 (1973): 1360–80, Mark Granovetter explained how weak ties to more distant and varied contacts offer strategic advantages to those who hold them, and that low-income individuals tend to depend more on strong ties. Many anthropologists have since described how important strong ties can be for vulnera-

- ble communities, however, given that strong, place-based ties are more dependable for those suffering extreme vulnerability. As one community leader in Rio often says, 'in the favela there are no beggars', because of the strong solidarity networks that exist in these communities.
32. Theresa Williamson, 'Rio's Favelas: The Power of Informal Urbanism', in *Perspecta 50: Urban Divides*, ed. Meghan McAllister and Mahdi Sabbagh (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), 213–28.
 33. In an insightful article, 'Land Tenure and the Self-Improvement of Two Latin American Informal Settlements in Puerto Rico and Venezuela', *Urban Forum* 24, no. 1 (2013): 49–64, Jean M. Caldieron finds that, in Puerto Rico and Venezuela, in cases where 'even without land tenure, self-improvement ... takes place ... even without any formal documentation ... there is perceived land tenure. This perception fuels a stronger sense of connection to the land than any documentation has the power to create.' That is, *commoning* and community-led development produce a sense of belonging that formal documentation cannot replicate.
 34. Maritza Stanchich, 'People power in Puerto Rico: how a canal community escaped gentrification', *The Guardian*, 18 January 2017, last accessed 9 October 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2017/jan/18/people-power-puerto-rico-canal-community-escaped-gentrification>.
 35. Recognising through their lived experience what Durand-Lasserve expressed in a 2006 essay, that property rights 'may hinder community cohesion, dissolve social links, and induce or accelerate segregation processes through market eviction' (Alain Durand-Lasserve, 'Informal Settlements and the Millennium Development Goals: Global Policy Debates on Property Ownership and Security of Tenure', *Global Urban Development* 2, no. 1 (2006): 1–15).
 36. 48 per cent is derived from UN figures that put the human population at 9.7 billion by 2050 (UNDESA, 'World population projected to reach 9.7 billion by 2050', 29 July 2015, last accessed 9 October 2019, <http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/news/population/2015-report.html>) and figures putting the slum population at 3 billion by 2050 (UN Habitat, 'The Challenge', n.d., last accessed 9 October 2019, <http://mirror.unhabitat.org/content.asp?typeid=19&catid=10&cid=928>).
 37. The policy response to new informal settlements that can still realistically be considered slums, shanty towns or squatter communities should be different, attempting to prevent such occupations through humane affordable housing and community-building models. However, policies to respond to established and consolidated communities should be different, building on community-established assets.
 38. John P. Kretzmann, John L. McKnight, *Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community's Assets* (Evanston, IL: Institute for Policy Research, 1993), is the basic manual that introduced the field of ABCD. For a specific view of ABCD comparing typical international development with that conducted in Rio's favelas, see: CatComm, 'Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD)', n.d., last accessed 18 December 2019, <http://catcomm.org/abcd/>.

Comparative Approaches to Informal Housing Around the Globe brings together historians, anthropologists, political scientists, sociologists, urban planners and political activists to break new ground in the globalisation of knowledge about informal housing. Providing both methodological reflections and practical examples, they compare informal settlements, unauthorised occupation of flats, illegal housing construction and political squatting in different regions of the world. Subjects covered include squatter settlements in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, squatting activism in Brazil and Spain, right-wing squatting in Germany, planning laws and informality across countries in the Global North, and squatting in post-Second World War UK and Australia.

The volume's global approach is found not only in the variety of topics but in the origins of its authors, who between them contribute specialist knowledge from Africa, Asia, Australia, the Middle East, North and South America, and Eastern and Western Europe. Bringing together such a wide range of authors and subjects demonstrates the power of comparative research to open up new perspectives. By comparing, for example, toleration of informal housing in Hong Kong and Paris, squatting in the Netherlands and communist East Germany, or slums in nineteenth-century Europe and twentieth-century Africa, the chapters connect different contexts in path-breaking fashion.

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