

# Transcending (in)formal urbanism

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In recent years ‘urban informality’ has become an object of growing policy and scholarly concern. Frequently perceived as the formal’s ‘other’, informal urbanism can be said to have a regular place in the minds of scholars and practitioners alike. In policy, it is regularly invoked in relation to the regulation of informal housing, informal uses of public space and the informal economy. Attempts to urbanise informal settlements, regularise informal workers and formalise informal activities indicate the prevalence of a normative approach towards urban informality. This situates the ‘formal’ as more desirable than, if not superior to, its ‘other’ counterpart. Key to this is a necessary ‘othering’ of informality that creates a series of dualisms, between formal and informal, between a localised informal and a globalising formal, or an informal resistance and a formal neoliberal control, that this special issue seeks to challenge.

Transcending dualisms in informality and making it a valuable locus of urban theorizing is a mission that, in our view, emerges from a well-established tradition. Academic studies on the question of urban informality produced across the global North and South have long shown the limitations of inevitably thinking the in/formal in dichotomous terms (Rakowski 1994). In particular, urban informality has for a while now been underscored as a critical means of understanding urban processes by key and emerging voices in urban studies (AlSayyad and Roy 2003; Luque-Ayala and Neves Maya 2018). For instance, contributions in urban studies have pointed to the value of the diversity of approaches to urban informality (McFarlane and Waibel 2012; Recio et al 2017). Some even noted the possibility of an ‘informal turn’ (Elsheshtawy 2011) in built environment research. Equally, informality has found a place in some of today’s major themes and global agendas (e.g. d’Alençon et al 2018).

If urban informality is now recognised as a fertile ground for urban theorizing, this special issue aims to take stock of this starting point and propose more directly that, once we step beyond dualist interpretations of urban informality, it can have a key place in advancing urban theory. It can do more than just creating a space to work on the borderlines between formality and informality, opening up avenues for theoretical advancement and challenging where the confines of urban studies in itself might be. Hence, we explicitly aim to prompt a dialogue across a diversity of disciplinary approaches still rarely in communication, with the goal of transcending static formal-informal divides. Gathering contributions from geography, planning, cultural studies and political science, the issue asks: how can informal urbanism be a catalyst for enhancing, where not reforming, urban theorising? Authors are tasked with addressing the complexities of the borderlands between formal and informal, and the special issue as a whole speaks to the potential for moving beyond (‘transcending’) the othering of informality for the benefit of a more inclusive urban theory contribution. Geographically, the issue focuses across a variety of international sites, from Maputo, Rio de Janeiro and Mexico City to South African, Nepalese and Indonesian cities. This eclectic collection of sites for urban research is seeking to encourage the specific focus on, if not field of, informality to better

serve and broaden the community of urban studies towards a more 'global' (Robinson 2016a; Acuto and Parnell 2016) urban theorizing, starting from situated experiences and including cross-disciplinary experimentation.

### **A tradition of informality**

In a burgeoning field on informality more generally, we identify three contributions at different times that document the evolution of Anglophone academic knowledge as scholars have grappled with the values and tensions of a dichotomous concept. These different moments overlap and inform each other rather than go away, and key concerns such as injustice and neoliberalism have remained central, albeit in changing ways. The review serves to show how analyses of urban informality have proliferated in relation to different aspects of urban life and in relation to different epistemological and ontological framings. The acknowledgement of, and engagement with, this proliferation provides the platform for our argument here.

Surveying an important formative period in the use and development of the term (1984-1993), Cathy Rakowski (1994) summarised the debates about informality as falling into two approaches. Understandings of informality, often pinpointed on either housing debates or informal economy analyses, tended to be based on either 'structuralist' or 'legalist' views. For structuralists, the key issues relate to ways in which socio-economies are dependent on disjunctures and the role of the state is to try and bridge these differences in order to promote equality. For legalists, the disjuncture emerges from the legalities and bureaucracies of the state itself and are not structural. From this perspective, the role of the state is to remove the regulations and laws that create the disjuncture. In both views, neoliberalism looms large and both were translated into the 'urban' in the form of poverty, poor employment prospects, land markets and a complicit state, and for legalists, through bureaucracy and property rights. This summary of debates becomes an important reference point for the next moment we consider here.

Fast forward 10 years and Roy and AlSayyad's (2003) contribution, focusing more explicitly on urban informality, seeks to work with the Latin American locus of the debates that Rakowski notes, and bridge to other geographical areas. In so doing, the value of their approach is to retain the focus on neoliberalism and extend it so that the urban itself becomes a site of restructuring and urban informality, a way of (neoliberal) life. In this way, understanding urban informality becomes a key means of understanding the differentiating processes of neoliberalism and liberalisation of economies across the world. Few have heeded the importance of their 'territorial' caution that 'urban informality as a new way of life is anchored in a Middle Eastern context, as much as the articulation of urban informality as differentiated modes of urban transactions is situated in the South Asian context' (AlSayyad & Roy 2003: 6). Not least because of the apparent universal utility of focusing on informality as a series of transactions that speaks to the critiques of neoliberal governance. Most importantly for our purposes, AlSayyad and Roy's compelling argument to situate urban informality in relation to economic liberalisation has opened up a series of opportunities to examine how such processes differentiate and perpetuate various forms of injustices, discrimination and impoverishment in different cities. This has held true in research on the global South as much as in the North (Varley 2013; Dovey 2012), whilst encouraging greater

attention to the ordinary underpinnings of informality as for instance embedded in ‘do-it-yourself’ (Iveson 2013) forms of urbanism or interstitial conversations of the reality beyond the formal (Mukhija & Loukaitou-Sideris 2014).

Thus it is that, in surveying the field in 2012, McFarlane and Waibel value the diversity of approaches to urban informality, which becomes apparent across different geopolitical contexts. They provide some coherence to all these different forms by identifying four directions in which the debates about informality have gone in order to provide greater specificity on the ‘utility of the formal/informal urban divide’ (p1). They identify three, sometimes overlapping, areas of scholarly work that sees informality as primarily a spatial categorisation, and/or as organisational form, and/or as a form of governmentality. They also identify a fourth area as a specific response to AlSayyad and Roy’s contribution on informality as ‘negotiable value’. Usefully, they clarify that it is through the ways in which neoliberalism is changing the valuation of goods and services that concepts of in/formality provide analytical purchase because formality and informality have different relationships to fixing, determining, and negotiating value, including spatial values. In so doing, they eschew a search for ‘consensus on how informality should be conceived or deployed ... [and] ... demonstrate the range of debates around these terms’ (McFarlane & Waibel 2012: 9).

With this understanding of three important (although by no means exhaustive) moments in the evolution of the debates, we can argue that it is now time to make a different intervention in the debates in view of new, ongoing scholarship that engages with urban informality from a range of different perspectives (Bunnell and Harris 2012). Inspired by McFarlane and Waibel (2012) that there is value in identifying the different directions in which studies of urban informality have developed, but not necessarily working within their categorisations (for reasons explained below), we argue that it will be useful to work much more explicitly across different categories of research. Today informality ‘thinking’ has a legitimate place in disciplines with often limited currency and attention in social scientific urban studies, with debates in, for instance, sociology (Muller 2017), design (Keswani 2018) and political science (Sarmiento & Tilly 2018) all offering useful theoretical inputs into a conversation that does more than reiterate informality as the ‘place’ for alternative urban research. Inspired by an earlier motivation of Roy and AlSayyad of the value of working across categories, we argue that by working *across* – categories and disciplines – we start to see how informal urbanism can be a catalyst for urban theorising. That is, a form of theory-building that emerges out of particular, embedded contexts rather than universalisms, accounts for geographical diversity, transcends existing categories of thought in a relational way, and draws on multidisciplinary epistemological approaches. By working with commonalities as much as loose ends, with fragments as much as all-encompassing perspectives, we start to see what informal urbanism offers to urban theorising. In doing this we follow on other recent special issues, like the dialogue on the *Journal of Development Studies* on the practices of the state in Southern African cities (Benit-Gbaffou 2018) or current work in *Urban Studies* on East Asian cities (Chien 2017), but we also aim to advocate much more explicitly for interdisciplinarity in the study of informality, and for urban scholarship departing from, and seeking to transcend, the formal-informal binary.

## Issue outline

In seeking to catalyse urban theory, this special issue builds on three related steps we suggest could help with transcending dualisms in the understanding of informality: first, to transcend the disciplinary boundaries that limit informal urbanism to the study of housing or the labour market; second, to transcend the way in which informality is understood as separate from the domain of the formal (processes, institutions, mechanisms); and, third, to transcend the way in which informality is so tightly held in relation to understandings of neoliberalism. In light of urban crises and failed policy responses, we ask: How can informal urbanism be a catalyst for urban theorising? What does an engagement with urban informality across approaches reveal for the community of urban studies and urban practitioners? The special issue seeks to broaden and enrich our understanding of urban informality by creating a dialogue that addresses the multi-layered manifestation of informal urbanism across cultural, social, economic, urban and political boundaries.

The issue builds on a workshop jointly organised in May 2015 by City University London and University College London. The papers cover a variety of geographical regions, adopt different methodological lenses and engage with a range of urban issues – from cultural production, squatting and material infrastructures to street vending, informal politics and arts practices – to unpack, but not always privilege, the intricate relationship between the formal and the informal. This variety is in fact a key rationale of the issue: it speaks to that mode of experimentation and open engagement recently encouraged in the debate on the ‘nature of urban theory’ by Jenny Robinson and Ananya Roy (2016), and calls for an appreciation of the variety in theorizations of the informal not as a limit to cross-disciplinary communication, but rather as a productive juxtaposition of different ways to appreciate challenges to urban thinking.

The essays in the issue address the complexities of the borderlands between formal and informal and the potential for ‘transcending’ the othering of informality by focusing on issues such as the political dimensions of informal urbanism amidst control and subversion, the uses and applications of ‘informal’ practices on the ground of diverse urban areas in the global North and South, and the need to challenge understandings and discourses of informality through an engagement with creative practices and formal rules and policies. The empirics presented in the issue are kicked off by a theoretical scene-setting essay designed to outline the ontological and epistemological rationales underpinning these diverse moves towards the ways of ‘knowing’ informality. In a similar fashion, the issue is brought together by three commentaries by Andy Pratt, Colin McFarlane and AbdouMaliq Simone, which take stock of the lessons and issues raised in the articles and look at how dialogues across multiple perspectives can inform the study of urban informality, as well as how urban informality can be a useful launchpad for broader urban theorizations. Taking up the challenge of producing an evidence-based framework on how informal practices contribute to social life and urban revitalisation, and seeking a balance between views (and papers) on the North and the South, as much as on cultural, planning, geographical and political science perspectives, the issue aims to shed light on how informality poses major challenges for urban planning and how both city leaders and scholars can approach the encounter with the ‘informal’ city.

## Common threads and departure points

Tasking authors with engaging, where not transcending, the challenges of informality has been, in our reading, once again a productive source of urban insights gathered here with stories from very differing urban settings. Without the pretence of being able to capture in full the richness of so many different contexts, diverse disciplinary styles and serious theoretical debates, we hope to be able to convey some of the common threads emerging through the essays in this volume. The special issue shows three important themes. First, the importance of transcending disciplinary backgrounds and specificities to engage positively, but with some degree of critical reflexivity, with informality as common ground for research. Second, the centrality of the informality-neoliberalism connection is put into question as necessary empirical and theoretical background to informality, opening up a broader space of theorization and of practical discourse about informal urbanism. Third, the need to transcend binaries in the investigation of urban informality and urban theorising more in general, but also the opportunity space that this theoretical step affords us. These three moves offer a stepping stone for us to then begin the work of the concluding commentaries by offering a roadmap for a better informality-informed urban theory.

### *Transcending disciplines*

Central in any effort at inter- or multi-disciplinarity is some degree of reflexivity (Barry et al. 2008). Marx and Kelling illustrate this poignantly by unpacking the ways of 'knowing' informality capturing the practices of scholars and their modes of representing informality across a vast field of different theoretical departure points, from geography to development and sociology. Key here is the call to some degree of meta-analysis as a way to resolve the different stances and practices of different disciplines: as they evidence with their essay, there is value in unpacking, topologizing and speaking of the ways we speak of informality, not to simply resolve our disciplinary tendencies by seeking refuge in a convenient shared term like the 'informal'. As Marx and Kelling note, it is key to acknowledge the 'latent workings' of a 'common denominator' where power relations might be concealed by the veneer of obviousness. Simply, we should not take informality at face value or indeed normalise it in urban theory without question.

This is embraced, for instance, by Mbaye and Dinardi who propose a creative remapping of the informal underpinning of cultural policy. In doing so, they point out that terms that can help bridging different (disciplinary or else) views of the city, like informality, are not to be taken at face value. Rather, they contest the term itself: they take it as a point of departure to be at least partly overcome, moving beyond what they see as an 'instrumentalized dichotomy' inherent in its idea. This is taken even further by Grashoff, who does away with the term almost entirely preferring 'schwarzwohnen' as the driver of his historical analysis. This can be also done more subtly in the spirit of improving whilst questioning informality. For instance, Cirolia and Scheba, whilst offering evidence as to the value of informality, do offer some criticism of the concept: they note how all too often this idea embodies a dangerous tension and a sometimes-misleading simplification of the informal as 'everyday', perhaps conforming to the common 'everyday thread of southern urbanism' and running the risk of alienating other forms of informality. Hence Merkel shows at what length using informality as a concept can go to make intelligible the workings of informal urbanism across

a much wider dimension of the scales of the city. Her article merges conversations in labour studies, creative and cultural studies and urban studies to evidence the importance of the non-formality of co-working as critical urban practice. Here, akin to what Carrero and colleagues do in their assessment of the tacit networks responding to Nepal's 2015 earthquake, informality is re-placed within the core of urban governance as a legitimate practice rather than the 'other' to the formalised story. Equally, these essays highlight another latent binary that needs to be challenged: especially for its grounding in questions of housing, settlements and contextualised economies, urban studies has perhaps veered towards assuming that informality is in some ways local, when networks and linkages transcend scales and knit urban experiences trans-locally.<sup>1</sup> This becomes blatant when considering the more-than-local bases of, for instance, the economic networks and value chains that support some informal economies, or in relation to the impact of diasporic investment or rural-urban ties in shaping informal housing and settlement dynamics, or indeed as in Merkel, Carrero et al. or Mbaye and Dinardi, an even wider variety of urban dynamics from disaster response to cultural production.

The papers in the issue also testify to the continued need for evidence. Cirolia and Scheba then take it on themselves and the analysis of Delft in South Africa to provide further analytical and empirical backing to prove that 'informal urbanism' does in fact 'work' in cities. Carrero and colleagues, but also Cirolia and Scheba, Grashoff and Markel, all point at the importance of gathering (different forms of) evidence to document informality, not just for the sake of backing up findings but also of making informality tangible in the words of those disciplines these scholars work from. Importantly, Mbaye and Dinardi's analysis of the 'cultural polis' in the global South reminds us that the conversations we have on these pages, and theoretical speculations we make, are necessarily intertwined with practice. In their account discussions of informality need to be, and practically are, engaged with the cultural sector as key determinant of our theoretical vocabulary. Yet the same could be said of the disaster response sector in Carrero and colleagues, the utilities industry in Baptista's case or the complex of housing policies and practitioners in Grashoff's narrative, to name but a few. This flags an ulterior divide we might have to resolve, or confront: that between academia and practice, between the written page and the everyday reality, speaking to the importance of an 'engaged pluralism' (Barnes and Sheppard 2010) in urban studies that is at the same time also engaged with the practice (Siemiatycki 2012).

As Canclini's almost novelist account of journeying through Mexico City shows, it becomes central here to acknowledge the work that informality does for us. It offers an interdisciplinary idea that opens up a line of communication between different theoretical points of departure and different languages. This is a fragile achievement as scholars in urban informality are still called upon to speak back to their 'fields' in their specific voices, as a quick glance at the form of, for instance, Grashoff's, Carrero and colleagues or Cirolia and Scheba's papers demonstrate in their effort to still relate to history, disaster research and urban studies. A common focus on informality, then, works for us in that it provides a common space for engagement that is not exclusively theoretical and has something commonly shared as an interest. Transcending informal urbanism by starting from informality, perhaps, functions, to some extent, as a problem-driven form of research, minus the problem: informality becomes a positive space in-between where multiple viewpoints can engage in meaningful conversation.

### *Transcending neoliberalism*

The relevance for urban theory has often been reflected through an association between urban informality and neoliberalism. To the extent that urban theorists have been pre-occupied by neoliberalism, the logic seems to be that urban informality matters because it is related to neoliberalism. Through this association, urban informality is allowed to travel back to (an already well-established) canon of urban neoliberal theory. There is little doubt that such analyses of urban informality in the global South have been illuminating of urban dynamics and injustices, but such a view also comes at a cost.

The cost becomes more tangible when considering two reasons to revisit assumptions about automatic relationships between urban informality and neoliberalism. First, as Marx and Kelling argue, the relation between urban informality and neoliberalism is itself only related to a particular moment understanding of 'informality as condition' where neoliberalism is used to explain the emergence of informality and there are other ways in which informality is understood. Thus, a specific relation between urban informality and neoliberalism is made to work across other understandings. Second as the contributions in the special issue demonstrate, there are many registers through which urban informality can be related to urban theory. Remaining with a narrow (albeit important) relationship between urban informality and neoliberalism restricts the possibilities of identifying other ways in which urban informality can relate to broader urban theory.

Contributors in the special issue identify useful (but by no means exhaustive) examples of other ways of thinking urban theory through urban informality. For example, Baptista relates urban informality to urban theory through electricity infrastructures. Canclini makes connections through non-hegemonic networks that position cities. Carrero and colleagues, through the space-times of urban disasters. Cirolia and Scheba through multi-scalar readings of everyday life and Mbaye and Dinardi through the excess of cultural activities that go beyond neoliberal urban entrepreneurialism. For Grashoff and Merkel, both point out that informality plays a role in stabilising 'formality' in ways that do not obviously work through a neoliberal register. For Grashoff, *schwarzwohnen* simultaneously undermined state authority as stabilising the housing situation as informality existed beyond the state. For Merkel, co-working is caught up in being praised as an exemplary sector in neoliberal urban development and stabilises neoliberal policies of precarious employment but cannot be exclusively read in these terms.

### *Transcending binaries*

Producing evidence to document the interface between formal and informal practices, spaces, actors and mechanisms, constitutes a challenge that this special issue has sought to respond to. One of the ways in which informal urbanism can be transcended is by disrupting the binary thinking that often underpins it. Binary thinking, by opposing two distant poles, making them exclusionary, and separating them with an artificial divide, places informality as that which needs to be repaired, fixed and corrected. Instead, the articles in this collection go beyond dichotomous understandings by looking at the points of contact, finding a common ground, linking the parts to the whole and unveiling the intricacies that sustain formal-

informal dynamics across epistemological disciplines, methodological approaches and geographical locations.

What challenges lie ahead for *knowing* informality if we transcend its separation from that which is considered formal? Marx and Kelling propose focusing on common denominators in the three approaches to informality that are prevalent in Western urban scholarship in order to overcome the imprecision, limitations and ambiguity that sustain binary thinking. The analytical capacity of the concept of informality, and therefore its potential to shed light on and challenge urban injustices, can be improved by disentangling its double bind 'of firstly lacking precision and secondly contributing to broader urban theory in circumscribed ways'. Grashoff, in his historical analysis of the informal occupiers of flats during the East German state rule, further complicates the boundary between formal and informal housing, demonstrating how such occupation resulted from both compliance with the law *and* unauthorised tactics, giving way to the emergence of a 'grey zone' that challenges understandings of informality.

Furthermore, transcending the boundary between formal-informal, Carrero and colleagues, in their article on the central role that informal social bonds play in urban resilience in times of natural disasters, go beyond the assumption that a formal state's official response is the main way people get relief and recover from earthquakes and floods, while 'tacit networks of social support' were indeed found to be crucial. The article foregrounds the importance of the city's social fabric – where informality prevails – to complement the focus on the built environment of traditional disaster risk reduction programmes, stressing the need for policy to incorporate the dimension of informality in their formal responses to disasters and placing urban governance at the interface between formal processes and informal practices.

The sharp distinction between formal-informal workers represents another dichotomous form through which urban informality has been understood in contemporary cities. Examining the work of freelancers in the creative economy, Merkel puts forward co-working as an urban practice that makes visible as well as attempts to challenge the informalisation and precarity of employment relations through collective self-organisation and self-help. Informality here appears, once again, as a form of organisation of everyday life, rather than a lack thereof, at the same time showing how city governments are implicated in its reproduction by celebrating co-working spaces and entrepreneurial growth agendas. In a similar vein, Canclini reveals how in Mexico City informal markets, networks and practices, which are seemingly outside of the official economy such as in the street trading of food, clothes, films and CDs, are actually sustained by the complicity of formal institutions that overlook (if not participate of) behind-the-counter agreements. Informality, as we have seen, it is not confined to the survival strategies of the urban poor but is at the heart of negotiations between 'politicians, real estate companies and mafias that control transport, garbage and food traffic'. As noted in recent writing about the value of informality in urban theorizing (Hilbrandt et al. 2017: 946) informality needs to be read not only within the repertoire of the subaltern and the practice of subversion, but more broadly embedded 'in the architecture of states' as 'emerging through legal systems, embedded in negotiations between and within institutions, and based on conflicts between state regulations and prevailing norms'. Or, to put it simply, informal practices in the urban environment are as much part of those in power



than of those seeking to subvert it, and perhaps more widely, that not all informality has an explicit radical purpose.<sup>2</sup>

Another way of transcending binaries has been to examine the built environment, particularly the interface between the delivery of public services and its material infrastructure, both of which imply informal practices and formal networks that produce and reproduce them. Baptista's article on electricity services in Mozambique shows how everyday processes of informal maintenance and repair of utility networks grant access to the formal, national networks of electricity, which are themselves precarious and always in the making in the situated social and urban contexts in which they operate. Similarly, Cirolia and Scheba, in their analysis of informal housing in Cape Town, have surpassed dual oppositions between the local and the global, the ordinary/mundane and the extraordinary/spectacular, and the top-down and the bottom-up, by highlighting the centrality of the everyday, with its agency and precarity, as a useful lens of analysis of informal practices which are both relational and multi-scalar.

Other intersections that have enabled a disruption of the straightforward division between formality and informality connect official cultural practices with those of grassroots artists in Southern contexts of marginality. Blurring the divide between city and periphery, formal and informal, top-down and bottom-up, Mbaye and Dinardi propose an engagement with the ins and outs of the 'cultural polis' which brings together Latin American and African practices of cultural production and activism. In particular, the article shows how urban creativity is best understood by disrupting assumptions about informal settlements, which tend to be reduced to poverty, violence and marginality, overlooking the large number of connections, exchanges and collaborations across different parts of the city.

If urban informality is understood as a spatial categorisation, the distinction between West-non-West gives way to another form of binary thinking. Marx and Kelling transcend this regional dualism by showing how relational analysis can undermine essential views of informality linked to certain peoples, spaces or activities while also highlighting the form, organisation, stability and regularity that exist in the practices from materially precarious contexts. Merkel's article, in turn, refocuses the site of informality in Western cities, particularly in the creative labour markets of London, Berlin and New York, unsettling the elementary albeit persistent assumption that informal markets, informal housing and informal employment relations are essentially only found in the global South. Finally, Grashoff adds an East-West perspective to the common North-South dichotomy, expanding the relational focus of dominant studies of urban informality.

#### *Urban informality: departure points*

Going beyond the formal-informal divide, or else the 'othering' of the informal, opens up an in-between space that offers great potential for theoretical development. This has illustrated, in our reading of the contributions in this issue, a spectrum of at least three possibilities. First, scholars can leverage, even if momentarily and with a hint of criticism, informality as a point of departure to illustrate what needs to be transcended. Second, a step further, some can look 'back' to informality and illustrate what has been transcended and what this does to our understanding of the urban. And, third, others could build on both these steps and question,

then, what to do once we have transcended the binaries and disciplinary divides that often propel ways of knowing informality.

None of these theoretical angles is necessarily better than the other, but all point at the useful operations that, empirically as much as theoretically, informality affords us in an increasingly varied landscape of urban practice and theory. All put into practice the assertion (McFarlane and Waibel 2012; AlSayyad and Roy 2003) that we need to better understand and promote the work that informality 'does' for us in terms of theorizing and, where driven normatively, acting on the current state of urban development. This is also well reflected in the papers for this special issue by the wealth of empirical material that authors have provided us with in spite of word limitations and needs to justify often very different scholarly entry points into this discussion. This is a key element of the discussion we want to encourage here. Conscious of the tradition of informality in urban studies, and of the vast variety of empirical material now increasingly available from scholars at all stages in their careers, we see great potential in learning methods from each other as much as offering substance to theorization in the spirit of building an even greater place for discussions of informality at the heart of the pluralist field of urban studies. This is no easy stepping stone for further academic work, nor one free from contestation, but an important evolution in putting tangible evidence into play when seeking to build a greater legitimacy for informality in the study of cities. As noted, the spectrum of possibilities in the interpretation of how to transcend informality is open to at least three, if not more, departure points and not all authors conform to one or the other – leaving open the horizon of possibility of what this move 'beyond' the dichotomous and the 'formal other' thesis implies. Yet, as we hope the special issue will evidence, and as we have attempted to summarise here, there is some inherent value in this testing encounter which is realised by taking the theoretical and empirical advancements here not as an all-encompassing statement on informal urbanism, but rather as another encouraging step in the growing centrality it is occupying in the minds of urban researchers the world over.

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<sup>1</sup> We owe a note of thanks to Vanessa Watson for aptly pointing this out.

<sup>2</sup> Roy (2018) has noticed some of these dynamics in her recent discussion as to the role of the 'state' in informality – something present albeit in the background in other discussions in development studies (Davis 2018) and well understood in political science (e.g. van Tatenhove 2006; Cohen and Pegram 2018).