

# 1.3

## THE REVERSE OF URBAN PLANNING

### First Steps for a Genealogy of Informal Urbanization in Europe

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This text is an attempt to set out some little-known part of the European urban history: the “uncontrolled” expansion of poor neighborhoods through the main capitals of the continent, and its relation to the birth and evolution of urban planning.

The rise of poor, unauthorized housing areas happened in a big part of the European capital cities through the 20th century (Manzano Gómez 2018). Since this phenomenon, currently known as “informal urbanization”, has been widely attributed to “Global South” cities, the structural development of very similar urban processes in the very core of the capitalist world-system would contest their characterization as a-temporal expressions of southern “spontaneity” (Leontidou 1990). Therefore, a frequently unexpressed exceptionalism that would consider such kind of major urban transgressions in the “civilized” core of Europe impossible must be demythologized.

The European 20th century urban regulations could not avoid the existence of “gray spaces” (Yiftachel 2009), where the “normal” legal frames did not seem to be fully applied. The spatial agency of the poor and working classes and the existence of legal loopholes was a contributing factor in the development of such spaces, being confronted by subsequent legal and institutional changes. Our hypothesis is that despite the “official” planning history, “informal urbanization” was one of the main reasons of the birth urban planning in Europe, provoking a co-evolution between the survival housing production processes and the urban planning control frames.

This research was conducted through the analysis of two case studies, Madrid and Paris, and through an extensive literature review, crossing historical sources and current historiographical works in English, French, Spanish, Portuguese, and Catalan. In addition, texts in German, Italian, Swedish, Czech, and Russian were reviewed using online translation tools. This double methodology has made it possible to restore this subaltern (Roy 2011), European history, from the silence of the archives (Spivak 2005).

#### **The Origins of Informal Urbanization: “Spontaneous” Development and “Laissez-Faire”**

Although informal urbanization probably existed since ancient times, this type of urban growth multiplied and was increasingly problematized during the 19th century throughout Europe. In our cases of study, the control systems of city-growth, focusing mainly on the beautification of the façades and the respect of the streets width, didn’t attempt to control them. Only at the end of the

century the public powers, concerned by the link between housing conditions and the risk of epidemic diseases (Engels 1873) started to make mandatory the supply of water, the implementation of sewer systems or pavement in the capital cities. At that time, there was a blurred line between areas that today we would identify as “informal urbanization” and the common urban development.

Despite the general absence of hygienic conditions, some peripheral spaces started to be considered problematic by the press and public powers in different European capitals. The increasing connectivity of the international economy, which suffered transnational financial crisis in 1873 and 1882, and the increasing hygienist control of poor populations could partially explain the synchronic rise of accounts and images about poor, precarious areas in different countries as France, Germany, Sweden or Finland (Fig. 1.3.1).



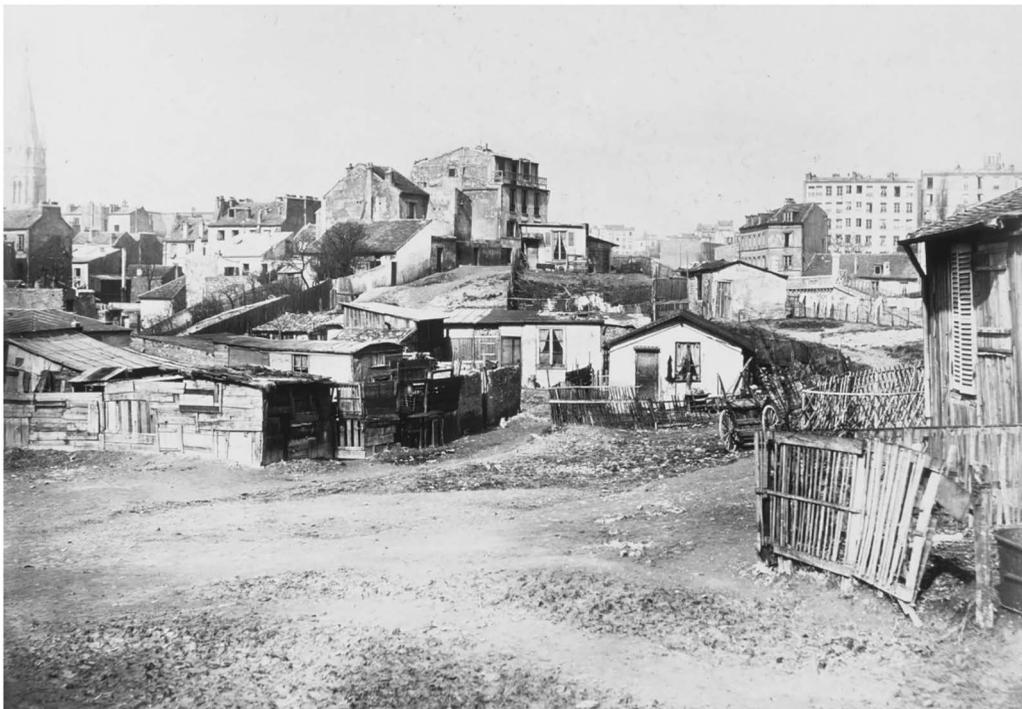
**FIGURE 1.3.1** Shacks around Helsinki cathedral, Finland, 1868.

Source: Hoffers Eugen, Helsinki City Museum.

The historical sources describe neighborhoods formed by groups of barracks, generally erected in hired plots around private streets without any kind of sanitary infrastructure. While the modes of commercialization were probably very diverse, there seemed to be a prevalent formula. The landowners delegated the management of peripheral lands to a main tenant, using legal long lease contracts, such as *emphyteusis*. Such main tenant sub-rented the land on different ways; for instance hiring the right to build a shack of some square meters on the area, or subdividing the land into small plots and renting them for a period. The key of such rental market seemed to be to avoid any property right for the inhabitants; the shacks could be demolished in any moment depending on the real estate interest of the landowners and, once the lease finished or the inhabitant leaved the area, the barracks would be destroyed. Accordingly, the inhabitants of such kind of areas economized enormously in the price of the lands, but were impelled to maintain their shacks in the most insalubrious situations.

Very similar systems seemed to give rise to similar patterns of urban growth as the peripheral “*slums*” in London (Gaskell 1990), the “*cités*” (Fig. 1.3.2) in Paris (Du Mesnil 1890), and the “*Laubenkolonien*” in Berlin (Hobbs 2012). Although we do not have data from the whole Europe, such substandard areas were legal in our cases of study, Paris and Madrid. In an economically liberal context, the public authorities only ensured the compliance of a few regulations, such as the alignment of the new built areas to the existing public streets, and the condition of the *façades*, without conditioning the houses developed inside the plots. Despite the abuses of the landowners, such rental system seemed to respond to the needs of the lowest strata of the working classes, frequently excluded from the housing rental market and with no possibility to own and build a private plot.

On the other hand, the lack of planning seemed to feed that kind of speculation by the landowners. The 19th-century urban regulations did not allow to plan the future uses or density



**FIGURE 1.3.2** “Cité” in the periphery of Paris. Rue Champlain, XX arrondissement, 1876-1878.

Source: Charles Marville, Musée Carnavalet, Histoire Paris.

of the periphery, making private investors carry out complicate arrangements with the public powers to anticipate the evolution of the public infrastructures and to ensure their properties value (Chavent 2003). The absence of limits to the building activity encouraged the landowners to build as densely as possible, “waiting” to materialize definitive constructions when the area was suitable for high-rise developments. The speculative, “frozen” areas of the periphery were occasionally used to obtain rents from such precarious tenancies, guaranteeing their destruction when needed for the capitalist’s interests (Hobbs 2012).

However, not all kinds of substandard areas rose as mechanisms of rent extraction. Although apparently scarce, episodes of 19th-century squats on public lands have been described in the United Kingdom (Ward 2002) and in Germany (Steinberg 1993; Hobbs 2012; Poling 2014), the latter known as *Barackenstädte*. It is also highly probable that excluded ethnical minorities, for example, Romanies used land squatting as a way to obtain a shelter through the whole continent.

Along the 19th century, under an hygienist perspective the poor, substandard rising areas became a “public problem” (Cefaï 1996) of public health (Bourillon 2000) but also of moral deviation (Shapiro 1985; Lévy-Vroelant 1999), where the “dangerous classes” (Chevalier 1958), spatially concentrated, threatened the dominant society. Last but not least, these areas could become spaces of insurrection (Jacquemet 2008) in a context of strong polarization of the emergent working class and revolutions as the “commune of Paris”. In such context, different kinds of devices were developed all around Europe for the purpose of controlling them.

On the one hand, the development of rudimentary legal frames tried to set up housing and urbanization minimum standards (Gaskell 1983; Kalff 2016). On the other hand, surveillance devices, such as insalubrious housing committees that visited poor areas (Shapiro 1985; Lévy-Vroelant 1999), major inquiries that mixed urban, housing, and social parameters like the carried out by Charles Booth in the UK (Topalov 2015) or “cassiers sanitaires”, identifying areas with high rates of infectious diseases (Fijalkow 2004), were developed in countries such as France, Belgium, Spain, Russia ... (Médicos Inspectores municipales de Salubridad é Higiene 1906).

However, most of these territorial control devices were mainly dedicated to demolishing “insalubrious” areas in the city centers, considered more dangerous from a sanitary perspective than the barrack areas where shacks were surrounded with “fresh air” and, of course, economically less profitable to renew. Additionally, the 19th-century liberalist “laissez-faire” sacralization of private property rights covered the “free will” to build miserable houses if inhabited by their owners in some countries, as France (Shapiro 1985). The sub-rent schemes apparently contributed to shirking the responsibility derived from transgressions against the Hygiene Acts in the case of tenancies (Gaskell 1990)

While such “temporal”, substandard urbanization was progressively swallowed by the city expansion, at the turn of the century new spaces of self-constructed poor houses, pushed by an increasing rural-urban migration, started to grow up beyond the limits of many capital cities in Europe. At the same time, the increasing hygiene regulations forced to install the polluting industries outside the inner cities, such neighborhoods grew up around the urban and industrial poles, reproducing similar kinds of housing morphologies and substandard areas beyond the city’s regulatory boundaries.

The rise of new substandard poor housing suburbs was known as “*Kakstäder*” in Stockholm (Deland 2001), “*Zone*” in Paris (Granier 2017) and “*Extrarradio*” in Madrid (Vorms 2012). In our cases of study, the new cheap areas were also developed through “private streets”, being legal due to the low requirements of the municipalities in which they were developed: the lack of urbanization, gas, water, and sewer systems in a moment in which such facilities started to become compulsory in the inner cities, triggering local debates about the extent of the periphery, their control, and the need of new frames to regulate the increasing suburbanization processes.

## Informal Urbanization in the First Decades of the 20th Century

At the beginning of the 20th century, a new phase of “informal urbanization” began, characterized by the emergence of substandard areas scattered throughout the distant metropolitan peripheries of the European cities, where the urban infrastructures and few regulatory systems could contain such migratory wave. The process was triggered by the improvement of mass transport and the introduction of the 8-hour workday. The possibility of commuting brought about a process of metropolization, of disaggregation of the consolidated city, and of dissemination of housing areas throughout the periphery. The working classes left overcrowded apartments in the city center to inhabit self-developed houses built on cheap suburban areas. Such new problematic spaces were not only barrack areas – that in some places, as in the Paris region, grew enormously – but also solid houses developed on hire-to-rent agricultural lands without sanitation.

The modernization of the inner cities increasingly contrasted with the survival architecture of the working classes. The previously explained fears toward the deprived populations, and the increase of the sanitary concerns provoked, in our cases of study, different public initiatives towards their clearance and redevelopment. However, the concerns about new redevelopments of the substandard peripheries gave rise in our cases of study, as in other European countries (Sutcliffe 1981), to discussions about new institutional and legal frames to increase the control of the city growth and enlarge it to a regional and national extent. This movement, sparking transnational discussions and forums, would signify the “birth” of contemporary urban planning.

After the First World War, in the 1920s, the phenomenon accelerated in the whole continent. The migrations to the main industrial poles during the war and the demobilization of the soldiers after the armistice suddenly increased the housing demand in a time in which the construction activity was totally frozen. The abandon of the building activity during the war continued after it due to the scarcity of materials and the rent regulation, which made the real estate market not profitable enough for capitalist investors. Facing this, the working classes and urban poor started to self-construct very humble houses in non-urbanized agricultural lands, increasingly accessible by trains, tramways or buses.

Although both historical sources and contemporary local historiography related this movement to cultural reasons, such as the “barracks” life of the soldiers during the war or a desire of a greater contact with the nature (Ward and Hardy 1985; Fourcaut 2000), it is likely that this movement toward the semi-rural periphery had mainly economic reasons, for instance the already mentioned scarcity of housing in the inner areas or the necessity to obtain an autonomous source of food supply.

At that time, different terms were used in various local contexts to refer to “anarchic” processes of poor suburban growth; “*Lotissements défectueux*” (Fig. 1.3.3) in Paris (Bastie 1964; Fourcaut 2000), “*Wilde Siedlung*” in Berlin and in Wien (Steinberg 1993; Urban 2013; Hauer and Krammer 2019), “*Borgate*” in Rome (Clementi and Perego 1983a; Villani 2012), “*Barriadas del Extrarradio*” in Madrid (Vorms 2012), and “*Nouzová Kolonie*” in Prague (Viktorínová 2010) ...

In addition to these already known cases, the conference proceedings of transnational forums as the Association générale des Hygiénistes et des Techniciens Municipaux (1927), the International Federation of Housing and Town Planning (1931), or the International Housing Association (1935), showed the existence of “uncontrolled”, poor suburbanization processes in the Low Countries (The Hague), Belgium (Bruxels), Budapest (Hungary), Bucarest (Romania), Denmark (Copenhagen), Luxembourg, and in various Polish cities.

In most of them, the mechanisms of urban growth seemed to be quite similar. Owners of very cheap agricultural lands, frequently flooding areas or unstable soils, decided to subdivide and commercialize them as plots for housing construction, hiring or selling them with installment



**FIGURE 1.3.3** “Lotissement” in Ivry-Sur-Seine, Paris periphery (Vajda, 1935).

Source: Bibliothèque Poète et Sellier, fonds historique de l’École d’Urbanisme de Paris.

contracts at very low prices. Over them, poor and working-class populations built very precarious shacks without any kind of public infrastructure, improving them through the years. Even though such constructions did not accomplish the building standards, the municipalities did not control the self-construction process due to the weakness of the urban regulations and police surveillance.

Such problems were answered by normative productions about the peripheral “defective” urban growth, giving rise to a specific literature that compared different local and national regulations of peripheral growth control in Europe (Lavan 1930; Cazenavette 1936). Although new Acts were approved, they were often bypassed. This happened in Germany and France with the development of shacks in “garden” areas without declaring their housing purposes; the “*lotissements jardins*” (Fourcaut 2000) and the “*Grüne slums*” (Urban 2013).

Such agricultural-land subdivision processes were not the only way of “uncontrolled” city growth of that time. Current historiography has shown the development at that time of land squats with barracks construction in public lands, forests, beaches, landfills, and flooding areas, in very different contexts such as London (Hardy and Ward 1984), Barcelona (Tatjer and Larrea 2011), Athens (Platon 2014), Rome (Clementi and Perego 1983a), Wien (Hauer and Krammer 2019), Belgrade (Vuksanović-Macura and Macura 2018), and Lisbon (Lavandeira Castela 2011). In addition, our archival inquiry revealed the existence of settlements on illegally occupied lands around Madrid – “*chozas*” areas – and Paris – “*campements de nomades*”.

Diverse reasons led the development of “spontaneous” substandard areas to be a problem for the public powers. For the municipal technicians, the uncontrolled expansion of private streets economically threatened public operations because of the cost of expropriating the already built



**FIGURE 1.3.4** Shacks in Limburg, the Netherlands, known as “krotten”, 1945.

*Source:* Taconis, Kryn. National Archives of the Netherlands.

areas. Additionally, such spaces were the antithesis of the urban design aesthetics carried out at that moment. They were condemned as “ugly”, and criticized due to the negative impression created for foreign visitors. Furthermore, in broader societal terms, these areas were perceived as a global threat for the social order (Beauchez and Zeneidi 2019). The representations of the upper classes of the time, strongly permeated by the concepts of race, considered them, especially the squatter areas, a problem of “social” and “moral” hygiene. They were regarded not only the origin of contagion of epidemic diseases, but also environments that could provoke the corruption of the body and mind of the poor, causing a general nation decay since they were transmissible from one generation to the next.

The necessity of controlling the urban growth of the new peripheries led the capital cities to try to annex them using administrative projects such as the “Gross Berlin”, “Grand Paris”, and “Gran Madrid”. These projects were linked to regional plans in a good part of the European capitals. Although some cities had already set up zoning areas, as the German ones, the new regional plans generalized such building regulation, establishing the areas in which housing development was allowed, or forbidden, and the conditions in which they would happen regarding their location, illegalizing the “spontaneous” transformation of rural land into housing areas.

Although “informal urbanization” clearly transgressed the plan’s purposes, and despite the general sanitary and urbanistic consensus about the necessity of their demolition – as effectively

happened, for instance, in Rome (Villani 2012) – the general answer of the first European spatial planning was the regularization and urbanization of these areas, greatly due to the collective action of their inhabitants and the general fears of a working-class revolution. That seemed to be the case in the periphery of Paris (Fourcaut 2000), Madrid and Vienna (Hauer and Krammer 2019). However, it wasn't rare that some areas remained in substandard conditions until the last decades of the 20th century (Hardy and Ward 1984; Lillo 2005; Viktorínová 2010).

Contrastingly, the poorest areas, frequently squatted and inhabited by rural immigrants and racialized populations, were destroyed, as “la Zone” of Paris (Granier 2017), “Bairro das Minhocas” in Lisbon (Lavandeira Castela 2011), las “Chozas de la Alhóndiga” in Madrid and the “barracas de Montjuic” in Barcelona (Tatjer and Larrea 2011), generally without re-housing solutions. In some cases, both built areas and their inhabitants came to “disappear” during the Second World War.

### Informal Urbanization after the Second World War

With different chronologies, the substandard city growth through barrack areas without public services re-emerged in a third moment, after the Second World War, touching particularly the Mediterranean Europe and the Eastern Block.

Although this new period was characterized by the existence of mature urban planning, which prohibited any kind of insalubrious construction, the phenomenon spread in different countries after the 1950s, being arbitrarily tolerated or eliminated by public administrations, which acted according to very different local political contexts. Thus, the phenomenon cannot be attributed to any economic crisis; on the contrary, the rise of industrial development in post-war Europe provoked a mass migration to the cities, in which the quantity of legal housing produced was not enough to satisfy the increasing demand. In the capitalist countries, the private sector did not respond to the demand for cheap houses causing a huge shortage, only mitigated by social housing. In the socialist countries, the State, in charge of the building sector, did not manage to produce enough houses for the new urban workers, occasionally tolerating self-developed areas until the execution of the projects legally planned (Göler *et al.* 2012).

The historiography and historical sources consulted showed, as in previous periods, the commercialization of plots produced by agricultural land subdivisions. Their illegal housing development, due to their not compliance with the zoning norms and the absence of sanitary infrastructures, was known as “*suburbios marginales*” (Vorms 2017) in Spain, “*borgata*” in Italy (Clementi and Perego 1983b), “*loteamentos clandestinos*” in Portugal (Salgueiro 1972), “*afthēreto*” in Greece (Romanos 1970), and *vremianka* in the USSR (Bohn 2014). In many of these countries, the urban regulations did not greatly impede the reproduction of this phenomenon until the late decades of the 20th century. On the other hand, land squatting areas were also developed in different European countries at that moment, being known as “*bidonvilles*” in France (Blanc-Chaléard 2016), “*chabolas*” (Fig. 1.3.5) and “*barracas*” in Spain (Tatjer and Larrea 2011; Vorms 2013), “*baraccopoli*” in Italy (Clementi and Perego 1983b), “*divlja izgradnja*” in Yugoslavia (Le Normand 2014), and “*samostroy*” in the USSR (Stas 2017).

In this period, agricultural land commercialization and land appropriation seemed to coexist yet, within more blurred frontiers, due to their common illegal status. Processes of unrecognized commercialization of the lands gave rise to informal tenancy situations, through unwritten legal agreements with the landowners (Volovitch-Tavares 1995). Although there seemed to exist a broad range of situations, the new spaces of informal urbanization were frequently situated in areas where housing was prohibited by urban planning. The “informality” allowed



**FIGURE 1.3.5** “Chabolas” close to Praga bridge, Madrid, 1955.

*Source:* Archivo Regional de la Comunidad de Madrid. Fondo Martín Santos Yubero. Comunidad de Madrid has granted the rights to use the image free of charge.

landowners to obtain rents from lands in which otherwise it would be impossible due to the legal use assigned by zoning. The substandard urbanization at this moment became “informal”.

In our cases of study, the houses on that time was generally more precarious because their construction happened in clandestine conditions, frequently during the night. The general lack of property titles frequently made the housing improvement not a reliable investment for their inhabitants.

Although a generalization of vaccines and eradication of epidemic infections reduced the sanitary risk linked to informal urbanization spaces, their consideration as places of shame for the public administration, their economic threat to urban planning and real estate investments, and the highly political risk of that spaces in a cold-war context made new steps in the public control of the phenomenon necessary.

During that period, in our cases of study new slum-clearance regulations were approved in order to expropriate and demolish “informal urbanization” areas with smaller costs. At the same time, the State’s gain of big quantities of cheap land facilitated the construction of massive re-housing solutions, allowing a closer control of their populations and producing a sustained reduction of informal urbanization. A process that seemed to happen in other parts of the continent as Italy, Portugal, Germany, or the USSR.

### **A Transnational History with Common Patterns**

As we have seen, informal urbanization was a common process in Europe during the 20th century. The increasing territorial control of the modern and contemporary State (Foucault 2006) had a specific expression in the historical development of urban planning and in the outlawing of “undesirable” kinds of urban growth.

In spite of different legal contexts, the precarious housing development re-emerged on various occasions since the 19th century. Although there were different expressions and local names of such phenomenon, it seemed to present a quite similar materiality through the continent, and equivalent mechanisms of cost reduction: investing the minimum capital in the shacks and lands gave place to diverse kinds of agreements of housing construction without full ownership of the land.

However, we can observe two broad, transnational changes in the history of informal urbanization in Europe. Firstly, its legal situation gradually deteriorated, due to a long illegalization process. Even though urban planning was intended to avoid such kind of spaces, the control provided by the urbanistic legal frames seemed, at large extent, powerless to avoid it. Producing, as a side effect, adaptations in the popular and speculative practices that conducted to the abandon of legal contracts with abusive conditions and the use of “informal” agreements with no rights for the inhabitants. Secondly, this phenomenon evolved geographically, since their prevalence was displaced from the economically central countries of the continent – France, Germany – to the periphery – Mediterranean and East European countries.

Informal urbanization rise didn't seem to be related to single events, but to entire economic cycles in the continent. It occurred before, after and between the World Wars, among countries in conflict and within neutral ones, apparently constituting a component of the long-term processes of European capitalist accumulation. The economic growth of the continent, instead of urban planning territorial control, could be the key to explaining the decline of “informal urbanization” in Europe. The rise of a post-industrial economy and the configuration of a “geography of privilege” (Wallerstein 1988), a consequence of the enforcement of the center-periphery economic global dynamics, could have contributed to both their drastic reduction after the 1960s in Europe and their expansion in global south cities.<sup>1</sup>

Although the traces of the historical expressions of “informal urbanization” in Europe seem to have been largely erased, the heritage of such processes remain today as the origins of a part of the European social housing areas. Although the spaces themselves disappeared, their past existence polarized the city growth, qualifying parts of the city as working-class spaces, and frequently corresponding with today's most vulnerable European urban areas.

## Note

- 1 This text was written in late 2019 and send to publication in February 2020. Meanwhile, the works of the sociologist B. Kovats have established parallel hypothesis through a quantitative analysis of informal housing in Hungary and Greece (Kováts, 2020, 2022). Further research should serve to establish a dialog between this literature and the ongoing work of other academics, specially as those gathered in the research network “La Ville Informelle au XXe Siècle”, in order to assess the links between the history of informal urbanization in Europe and that of other world regions.

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