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Thesis title: The Reverse of Urban Planning. Towards a 20th Century History of Informal Urbanisation in Europe and Its Origins in Madrid and Paris (1850-1940)

• **Problems addressed and aims of the dissertation**

The objective of this thesis was to understand the 20th-century history of informal urbanisation in Europe and its origins in Madrid and Paris. The concept of informal urbanisation was employed to refer to the process of developing shacks and precarious single-family housing areas that were not planned by the public powers and were considered to be substandard because of their below-average materials and social characteristics. This kind of urban growth process, which is very common today in the global south, was prevalent in Europe during the 19th century but almost disappeared from the continent throughout the 20th century. This process has raised questions about the history of the phenomenon.

Our main hypothesis was that despite being a phenomenon with ancient roots, informal urbanisation emerged as a public problem and was subsequently prohibited in connection with another historical process occurred: the birth of contemporary urban planning. Therefore, its transformation into a deviant and illegal urban growth mechanism would have been a pan-European process occurring at the same pace that urban planning developed during the first decades of the 20th century.

The purpose of this research was to study the historical extent of informal urbanisation in Europe and analyse its historical process of problematisation and illegalisation. This approach permitted us to understand the nature of that phenomenon before it was prohibited, discuss the birth of urban planning as a response to informal urbanisation, and analyse the co-evolution between informal urbanisation practices and the legal frameworks developed to restrict it.

• **Relevant current research in the scientific field**

Analysing informal urbanisation is a growing topic within urban studies. In the last decade, a large number of research studies have attempted to analyse this kind of urban growth throughout the world. However, many of the fundamental theoretical constructions were developed by representing the history of that phenomenon as an object of speculation and mystification. In contrast, although informal urbanisation has remained an under-researched topic in the historical field, some work in recent years has restored the history of this phenomenon in different locations, remaining extremely fragmented from a historical and geographical perspective. In addition, few of these studies were interested in the urban growth dimension of the phenomenon and, accordingly, in the relationship between informal urbanisation and urban planning.

At the edge of both fields, a large research gap existed.

Firstly, although “common sense” and the scarce comparative research on informal urbanisation assumed this phenomenon to be a southern European urban growth mechanism, the real extent of informal urbanisation in 20th-century Europe had never been systematically researched and remained unknown.

Secondly, although informal urbanisation was frequently identified as an atemporal grassroots process of urban growth that contrasted with top-down processes of urban planning, no systematic knowledge existed about the origins of the phenomenon and the role of urban planning in its restriction.

Thirdly, although the history of urban planning has a large historiographical tradition, nobody seems to have attempted to discuss the “birth” of urban planning in Europe in relation to the history of informal urbanisation.

• **Methods used**

Analysing the 20th-century history of informal urbanisation in Europe was an ambitious task that required using a large number of sources. To contend with this issue, this thesis combined two main methods: historiographical research about informal urbanisation in Europe and archival research of two case studies, Madrid and Paris, to make the account more precise by analysing primary sources of the subject.

Concerning the historiographical analysis, the research examined texts in English, French, Spanish, Portuguese, and Catalan, crosschecking the main references to other equivalent European phenomena, and researched electronic database articles on informal urbanisation in Europe. To achieve this, one of the main tasks was not only to use the generic English terms for the phenomenon but also to identify the local terms used to describe informal urbanisation. In addition to using sources in the previously mentioned languages, online translation engines were used to study sources written in Italian, German, Russian, and Czech.

Regarding the case studies of Madrid and Paris, the analysis included two levels. The first involved the metropolitan scale and consisted of analysing accounts of informal urbanisation in various neighbourhoods and its regulation and planning by municipal institutions. The second level involved analysing a specific territory in the periphery of each city, Saint-Denis in Paris and Puente de Vallecas in Madrid, permitting an understanding of the urban growth dynamics on a microscale.

To face the limitations presented by traditional planning history analysis of the urban growth, which is done mainly by studying master plans and urban regulations, this thesis required going beyond the top-down perspective of the city by adding sources other than planning materials. Accordingly, in addition to searching historical urban planning libraries and documents, we performed archival work on administrative, police, and press accounts. Through these sources, we gathered information about the popular and real estate dynamics of informal urbanisation and the way they interacted with the urban regulations.

As a result, it has been possible to achieve a multilevel analysis: the macroscale, studying the European dimension of informal urbanisation; the mezzo-scale, analysing the evolution of the phenomenon in the Madrid and Paris metropolitan dimensions; and the microscale,

researching the specific spaces of Puente de Vallecas and Saint-Denis. These methods and scales and the search for historical regularities and patterns places this thesis at a methodological crossroad between comparative history, historical sociology, and socio-history, all of which were applied to research on about urban planning and city growth.

• Main results and outcomes reached

This research has shown that informal urbanisation was a pan-European phenomenon that affected the main cities of the continent throughout the 20th century. This perspective challenges the exemplarity and exceptionality of European urbanism, making it possible to understand it as a global phenomenon and reject perspectives that identify informal urbanisation as a cultural trend of southern contexts and “spontaneous” cultures.

Our research of these informal areas, which were produced mainly through poor private allotments and housing developed on land squats, revealed two key moments of explosive growth across Europe: the 1920s and 1960s. The near disappearance of informal urbanisation throughout the continent seemed to be a consequence not of the historical development of urban planning—which was commonly transgressed and bypassed—but of the massive construction of social housing states. This achievement could have resulted from the exacerbation of global economic inequalities, permitting the development of a geography of privilege in Europe in contrast to the stagnation or even worsening of housing conditions in southern contexts.

Concerning the cases of Paris and Madrid, the origins of informal urbanisation—that is, the moment the issue started to be problematised—seemed to occur in the second half of the 19th century, when a number of hygienic norms and surveillance devices began to control housing characteristics. From that moment onwards, informal urbanisation areas formed peripheral belts in both cities. This growth became the object of an illegalisation process of which we have identified three phases: (i) the unregulated development of the phenomenon during the second half of the 20th century, (ii) the institutional production of “exception regulations” to permit a controlled development of substandard housing in the peripheral fringes of both cities, and (iii) the synchronic prohibition of informal urbanisation in the 1920s and its illegal reproduction.

Although some contextual differences existed regarding the extent of informal urbanisation, the morphology of the spaces, and the planning response, in both cities the illegalisation process was relatively similar. In both cities, common historical patterns can be identified.

Counter-intuitively, most of the informal areas of Madrid and Paris did not seem to emerge consequence of a popular urbanisation process based on bottom-up dynamics, but of real estate strategies that permitted very cheap housing to be developed by precarising the dwellers’ rights. The development of rent-to-buy contracts and land rental schemes made it possible to disassociate housing and land ownership, permitting a cheap and progressive development of these houses. The building practices in informal areas were usually legal and

complied with private land contracts and public urban regulations until the prohibition of the phenomenon.

In both cities a number of factors seemed to collide to trigger the banning of informal urbanisation. The public powers considered this kind of urban growth to be pathological, thinking that it provoked degeneration among the inhabitants, served as focal points of epidemic diseases, and threatened the whole nation with the risk of contagion and decline. In addition, these spaces were seen as a threat to public order, as hovels of criminals and potential triggers of popular uprising. Furthermore, these informal areas threatened the upper-classes' ideals of future beauty and harmony of urban spaces, and the lack of planning that permitted these areas to grow had to be dealt with because of their economic inefficiency. Because the unrestricted development of "undesirable" neighbourhoods was permitted in any part of the city, private real estate investments were endangered and the public powers had to demolish poor housing areas, paying large expropriation costs to set up infrastructure throughout the periphery and begin urban renewal operations in those areas.

However, informal urbanisation was tolerated in both cities, allowing the extent of the phenomenon to be controlled through "exception regulations", which made the process legal. The development of those areas and their final transformations seemed to be mechanisms of urban growth nourished by both private landowners and the public powers to facilitate cheap housing development. In some cases, developing specific public and private legal frameworks made it possible to use land for housing purposes and reduced the inhabitants' rights, easing the future demolition of the spaces and their transformation into "normal", more valuable urban areas. The final prohibition of informal urbanisation increased this precarisation and facilitated the implementation of urban planning. However, building practices also evolved to bypass the progressive legal attempts to restrict it from becoming a clandestine phenomenon, increasing the development of squatting areas and transforming poor housing construction and commercialisation into a hidden practice.

• Areas of potential further research

The thesis has allowed us to understand the European dimension of informal urbanisation and its illegalisation in Madrid and Paris. The next logical step would be to study the eradication of the phenomenon in Europe by analysing the slum-clearance operations carried out during the 1960s and 1970s in Madrid and Paris, using part of the materials gathered through this research.

Another possible path would be studying the history of informal urbanisation in Latin America, where historical analysis of the subject remains scarce despite the existence of a large urban studies bibliography. Using the same methodology of this thesis for that region would allow us to analyse the influence of public policies on informal urbanisation in both regions and to further identify common historical patterns and differences between northern and southern contexts.

Finally, another path would be to analyse the informal urbanisation of the second half of the 20th century by using popular sources in world areas where they still exist. This research would facilitate obtaining information about informal urban growth on a microscale barely registered

by the archival sources, integrating oral history into the research, and using the anthropological tool of “life-stories” to trace the historical development of the houses. Such “housing-stories” would permit discussing the hypothetical existence and evolution of a collective self-management of the spaces in areas not fulfilling urban planning regulations. This bottom-up historical research could possibly show the historical emergence of extra-legal structures of coercion and control of the illegal real estate market, developed to ensure the ownership in the cases of land squats.