Constructing ordinary places: Place-making in urban informal settlements in Mexico

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Abstract

Observers from a variety of disciplines agree that informal settlements account for the majority of housing in many cities of the global South. Urban informal settlements, usually defined by certain criteria such as self-build housing, sub-standard services, and residents' low incomes, are often seen as problematic, due to associations with poverty, irregularity and marginalisation. In particular, despite years of research and policy, gaps in urban theory and limited understandings of urban informal settlements mean that they are often treated as outside 'normal' urban considerations, with material effects for residents including discrimination, eviction and displacement. In response to these considerations, this article uses a place-making approach to explore the spatial, social and cultural construction of place in this context, in order to unsettle some of the assumptions underlying discursive constructions of informal settlements, and how these relate to spatial and social marginalisation. Research was carried out using a qualitative, ethnographic methodology in two case study neighbourhoods in Xalapa, Mexico.

Mexico offers fertile ground to explore these issues. Despite an extensive land tenure regularisation programme, at least 60 per cent of urban dwellers live in *colonias populares*, neighbourhoods with informal characteristics. The research found that local discourses reveal complex and ambivalent views of *colonias populares*, which both reproduce and undermine marginalising tendencies relating to 'informality'. A focus on residents' own place-making activities hints at prospects for rethinking urban informal settlements. By capturing the messy, dynamic and contextualised processes that construct urban informal settlements as *places*, the analytical lens of place-making offers a view of the multiple influences which frame them. Informed by perspectives from critical social geography which seek to capture the 'ordinary' nature of cities, this article suggests imagining urban informal settlements differently, in order to re-evaluate their potential contribution to the city as a whole.

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1. Introduction: Urban informal settlements and marginalisation

The world is going through an unprecedented period of urbanisation. Observers agree that at some point in 2008, a momentous milestone was reached, heralding a new urban era: for the first time in history, half of humanity, or 3.3 billion people, lived in urban areas (Davis, 2006: 1; UN-Habitat, 2008: 11). Massive urbanisation is occurring not just in the feted megacities but in widespread 'faintly visible second-tier cities and smaller urban areas' (Davis, 2004: 7). Indeed, it is small and intermediate cities which contain the majority of the world's urban population, as more than half live in cities of fewer than 500,000 inhabitants, and one-fifth in cities of between one and five million (UN-Habitat, 2006: viii).

Urban growth rates are highest in the countries of the global South or the 'developing world', where cities grow by an average of five million new urban residents every month (UN-Habitat, 2008: xi). According to UN-Habitat (2008: 15), over the next four decades 'developing world' cities will absorb 95 per cent of the world's urban population growth. In cities where informal development is the norm rather than the exception, this means that 'urban growth will become virtually synonymous with slum formation in some regions' (UN-Habitat, 2006: viii). Estimates suggest that 'slums' or informal settlements house almost one billion people or one-third of the world's urban dwellers (UN-Habitat, 2008: 90), a population characterised as 'a billion squatters' by one observer (Neuwirth, 2005: 9). Key characteristics usually associated with informal settlements are irregular land tenure, self-build housing, low level of infrastructure and residents with low incomes.

The price of this new urban order is increasing inequalities within and between cities (Davis, 2006). Although cities are the main motors of economic growth, and in general, urban populations have better access to services, there is evidence that urban poverty is becoming as severe as rural poverty, as informal settlement residents do not benefit from the advantages of living in the city (UN-Habitat, 2006). Incidence of disease and mortality is higher in informal settlements than in other urban areas, although this is often not reflected in national statistics, which mask urban deprivation. Informal settlements, then, are seen not only as 'a manifestation of poor housing standards, lack of basic services and denial of human rights, [but] also a symptom of dysfunctional urban societies where inequalities are not only tolerated, but allowed to fester' (UN-Habitat, 2006: ix). In this view, the increasing spread of informal settlements housing large numbers of the urban poor in low- and middle-income nations of the global South is nothing less than the 'physical and spatial manifestation of urban poverty and intra-city inequality' (UN-Habitat, 2003: xxvi).

1.1. Limits of knowledge and the idea of place

Accounts which frame the 'problem' of urban informal settlements in this way leave little doubt as to their massive scale, not to mention the extreme inequalities they embody, and make a pressing case for action. But it is precisely the issue of what should be done, by whom, and how, about the problem of urban informal settlements (or 'slums', 'irregular settlements', 'favelas', and so on), that has exercised academics and policy makers since these 'dysfunctional' urban patterns were first perceived. As the above accounts show, some of the most prominent depictions of urban informal settlements have tended to conceptualise them in overridingly negative terms. This is hardly surprising given the very real inequalities and injustices that occur daily in these settings, and the fact that such accounts of informality are frequently motivated by an underlying ideological concern with social justice.

However, ideological constructions of informal settlements may lack an understanding of the more prosaic or micro-level processes involved in making these places. This paper argues that the lack of understanding of these places is reflected in discourses in which particular narratives dominate, containing some problematic assumptions. It has been suggested that 'discourse is an important investigative object to understand the process of marginalisation' (Wilson & Bauder, 2001: 260). Discourses are implicated in the construction of marginalisation as '[t]hese tales of reality . . . are core ingredients in processes that marginalise' (Wilson & Bauder, 2001: 259). Here, discourse is taken to mean collections of words, meanings and images, projected as stories of 'reality' with potentially powerful effects. In academic and policy fields, discursive marginalisation may reveal gaps in understanding about urban informality, through the exclusion of certain perspectives or narratives, as well as through persistent negative interpretations of places and people.

Relating to negative characterisations of urban informal settlements, observers have highlighted the resurgent use of the term 'slum' (e.g. UN-Habitat, 2003; Davis, 2006), and seen this as evidence of a worrying trend towards a generally negative and over-simplified universal image of informal settlements (Gilbert, 2007: 698; see also Varley, 2008). The reproduction of terms like 'slum' or 'squatter' (e.g. Neuwirth, 2005),

indiscriminately applied to places and people under the 'informal' heading, obscures diversity and complexity. Indeed, it has long been suggested that two parallel urban histories exist – the official history and the other, that of low-income urban groups – meaning that

> '[t]he work undertaken by informal community or neighbourhood organisations in providing basic services and site improvements for themselves (when official agencies refuse to do so) is a rich though poorly documented source of examples from which governments can learn much' (Hardoy & Satterthwaite, 1989: 305).

However, despite decades of research suggesting that 'formal' and 'informal' sectors are interconnected (e.g. Bromley, 1978; Moser, 1994; Ward, 2004), there is a continued emphasis in academic and policy discourses on the division between the 'formal' and 'informal' city. This has meant that urban informal settlements are often treated as outside 'normal' urban considerations (Roy, 2005).

Such discourses may be reflected in urban policy, whether formally enshrined in legislation, or as enacted by local level urban authorities. The discursive marginalisation of urban informal settlements may be used to justify policies with negative outcomes for residents, such as displacement, eviction and withholding investment. The physical or spatial layout of urban informal settlements, often portrayed as 'unplanned' and disorderly, can be used as a pretext to justify redevelopment of settlements by the authorities, on health and safety grounds. For example, in the South African province of KwaZulu-Natal, the Slums Act of 2007 was used to justify the demolition of 'slum' settlements and the displacement of their (mostly black) populations (Hadland, 2008; Kane-Berman, 2008), despite being fiercely resisted by grassroots organisations such as Abahlali baseMjondolo (Abahlali, 2009; Huchzermeyer, 2007). In 2009 the Act was found to be in conflict with the South African Constitution by the national constitutional court (Huchzermeyer, 2011); however, settlement evictions which preceded the law have continued apace, suggesting that even where formal, legally enshrined policy is challenged, local level interventions are equally important in reflecting and reproducing specific attitudes towards urban informal settlements.

Evidence from other countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America suggest similar tendencies. Mass evictions from slums and squatter settlements have also occurred in Nigeria in 2006 and more recently (Huchzermeyer, 2007; Rolnik, 2009). In Zimbabwe, from 2005 Operation Murambatsvina involved mass evictions from informal settlements, costing at least 700,000 Zimbabweans their homes or livelihoods, and indirectly affecting up to a fifth of the country's overall population, around 2.4 million people (Tibaijuka, 2005). In Asia, large scale evictions occur due to speculation, market forces, urban development and infrastructure projects (ACHR, 2003: 1). Evictions in Mumbai, which are a regular occurrence, have been highlighted in the international media (e.g. BBC, 2009; Pinglay, 2009); while the number of violent evictions in China is rising as economic development and urbanisation lead to increasing land values. In Latin American cities, despite historical decreases in eradication and eviction, recent evidence suggests a recurrence of these trends, with studies indicating that nearly 150,000 people were evicted in 15 Latin American countries between 2004 and 2006 (Fernandes, 2011: 7). Even where eviction does not occur, marginalisation may be socially and spatially reinforced, such as plans to build walls around *favelas* in Rio de Janeiro (Phillips, 2009). Responding to local and global economic and political forces, these interventions also suggest the damaging effects of discursive marginalisation in spatial terms, and support the impression that planning, as part of urban governance, has contributed to exacerbating urban poverty in countries of the global South through seeking to 'raise the costs of informality and to shift it spatially' (Watson, 2009: 157).

Thus despite years of research, and the many advances that have been made in both theory and practice relating to urban informal settlements, the effects of stigmatisation, discrimination, eviction and displacement are still felt by millions of urban dwellers today. Some observers suggest that this is reflective of critical gaps in urban theory, deriving from the dominance of particular epistemologies and methodologies within urban studies, which have led to the prevalence of 'apocalyptic and dystopian narratives of the slum' (Roy, 2011: 224). Such accounts reveal the limits of knowledge about urban informality, based as it is on certain privileged circuits of knowledge production which frame urban informal settlements in particular ways, exemplified by the dualistic framework mentioned earlier. This may lead to 'sanctioned ignorance' (Spivak, 1999 in Roy, 2011: 228), the unseeing of the productive spaces of informality that constitute significant swathes of today's cities; or to stereotyping of particular places and people in terms of their 'illegal', 'illegitimate' status in the urban environment. Both processes contribute to the marginalisation of urban informal settlements, and ensuing responses including eviction, demolition and displacement as outlined above.

In response, it has been suggested that urban theorists must seek to understand how knowledge is produced about these marginalised places (Roy, 2011). Exploring

the limits of urban theory through a detailed examination of how certain types of understanding about the city are produced and reproduced suggests laying bare processes of knowledge production, and specifically, how they can contribute to marginalisation. In particular, this requires understanding how spatial and social processes interact. Following Myers' (2003) suggestion that in order to understand the diverse pressures on urban space in the context of marginalisation, the social meanings of the built environment must be interrogated, this paper seeks to explore the linkages between social and spatial elements of marginalisation, through a focus on the socio-spatial construction of urban informal settlements as places. The aim of the article is thus to critically examine understandings of informal settlements, in order to unsettle some of the assumptions underlying these understandings, and to examine how these relate to spatial and social marginalisation at city level. This is undertaken through an exploration of the spatial, social and cultural construction of two *colonias populares* – low-income, self-built neighbourhoods with informal origins – in a medium-sized city in Mexico, based on the lived experiences of their residents, and other sources such as policy documents, public opinion and media reports, gathered using qualitative methods.

More specifically, this aim is pursued through foregrounding the spatial dimension of urban informal settlements, using critical social geographic conceptions of 'place', and employing 'place-making' as an analytical lens. Place-making is seen here as the construction of place by a variety of different actors and means, which may be discursive and political, but also small-scale, spatial, social and cultural. As a means of understanding the socio-spatial nature of construction, it is used to capture the messy, dynamic and contextualised processes that construct urban informal settlements, which may include the role of discourses in constructing specific marginalised places. Thus while place-making has the capacity to link individual and collective constructive efforts in place, it also illuminates the relationship between social and spatial marginalisation. In this sense, it contributes to the objective of highlighting gaps in urban theory and the limits of knowledge about these places, by relating to particular empirical and theoretical debates.

In terms of the paper's empirical contribution, the analysis that follows explores the discursive construction of urban informal settlements in Xalapa, and the lived reality of residents of these places. By contrasting simplified, homogenising discursive constructions of *colonias populares* with the lived experiences of their residents, which may be shaped by but are not limited to the effects of these discourses, it seeks to increase understandings of residents' views and their constructive efforts in place, which are often neglected in the local context and in wider discourses. The analytical lens of place-making, which is introduced from outside the usual debates on urban informal settlements, suggests an innovative intellectual approach with the potential to unsettle some of the more entrenched assumptions about these places. Theoretically, the article contributes to two current sets of debates: the move towards a 'postcolonial urbanism' in urban studies, underpinned by Robinson's (2006) conceptualisation of 'ordinary cities'; and recent ethnographic approaches to urban poverty which emphasise urban dwellers' agency in place, in response to the technification of urban poverty. By introducing an explicitly spatial dimension into these debates, this paper suggests a more robust theorisation of the relation between social processes and spatial outcomes. These ideas are explored in more detail in Chapter Two.

1.2. Research setting, methodology and structure

Mexico offers fertile ground to explore issues around urban informal settlements. Situated between the United States and Latin America, it is increasingly considered part of North rather than Central America. At the national level, Mexico is undergoing several complex and long-term transitions, including deeper integration into the international economy, and deepening social and political democratisation, entailing administrative decentralisation. However, it is reflective of much of Latin America, in terms of high levels of inequality, middle-income status and high levels of urbanisation (Gilbert & Crankshaw, 1999). Economic crisis in the 1980s, caused by debt crisis and structural adjustment, was followed by the devaluation of the peso in the 1990s (Heritage, 2004), resulting in increased inequality and a decline in living standards for much of the population (Graizbord & Aguilar, 2006: 92). Of Mexico's population of 114 million, in 2009 47 per cent was below the poverty line (CONEVAL, 2010). Despite having the most extensive and long-running land tenure regularisation programme in the world, at least 60 per cent of Mexico's urban dwellers live in areas with informal origins, known as *colonias populares*.

Colonias populares are low-income neighbourhoods which conform with many of the supposed characteristics of urban informal settlements in terms of 'cheaply acquired land, inadequate infrastructure, and self-help dwelling construction' (Ward, 1999: 1). *Colonias populares* have traditionally been seen as having comparatively good long-term prospects for upgrading and gradual physical integration into the city (Ward, 1999: 4). The highly politicised nature of low-income housing in

Mexico, where clientelism and patronage are still prevalent, means that settlers and developers play an important role in local, state and national political processes (Ward, 1999).

Research was carried out in two neighbourhoods in Xalapa, a medium-sized city of around 450,000 inhabitants. Xalapa is the State capital of Veracruz, and a centre for the surrounding agricultural region. As one of around a hundred medium-sized cities in Mexico, it plays a central role in a restructured system based on neoliberal economic reform (Meyers, 2003). Following a series of economic crises in the 1990s, and high levels of migration in the decades before, around half the population of Xalapa currently lives in *colonias populares*. Research was carried out in two case study *colonias*, Loma Bonita and Moctezuma. Loma Bonita is a newer settlement, established in 1998 on *ejidal*[1] land on the northwestern edge of the city, over an hour away from the city centre by bus. At the time of the research it was sparsely populated, with a population of about 200, and a relatively low level of basic services which included a rudimentary water system and a kindergarten, but no electricity or sewerage system. Moctezuma is a more established neighbourhood, founded in 1990 on land belonging to the Veracruz State Government, with a population of around 3000. It now has most basic services installed and was in the process of undergoing works to pave the main street during the research. It is about half an hour away from the city centre, and fairly well-connected by buses.

The two case study neighbourhoods were selected as broadly representative of informal development processes in Mexico and specifically Xalapa, based on their foundation on formerly agricultural land (albeit through different land acquisition processes), self-help construction processes, and collective negotiation for services. Selection criteria included the neighbourhood's status as a *colonia popular* (based on perceptions of residents and non-residents); location on the periphery of Xalapa; and relatively established nature. However, the two neighbourhoods diverge in terms of land acquisition processes, age and levels of consolidation, with Loma Bonita established almost 10 years after Moctezuma (in 1998 as opposed to 1990), and having lower levels of service coverage in terms of water, electricity and sewerage. This divergence is reflective of the nuanced and heterogeneous characteristics of urban informal settlements, both within and between specific neighbourhoods, offering a response to homogenising tendencies found in particular accounts of these places (explored further in Chapter Two). Their distinctive situation with regard to tenure, size and social mix allowed some degree of comparison between two neighbourhoods at different stages of consolidation. However, a direct comparative approach was not a primary aim of the study; rather, the findings from the two cases were used to rethink understandings of urban informal settlements at a general and specific level. Importantly, this approach also offered a perspective on how diverse neighbourhoods are subject to similar discourses within the same city, even where clear differences exist between the settlements, as revealed in Chapter Four.

Given the research objective of exploring people's lived experience of place, and emphasising the perspective of marginalised residents, a broadly qualitative methodology was employed to gather the findings explored in later chapters. Over three visits in seven months in 2006–2007, 34 semi-structured interviews were carried out with 42 respondents including residents, local government officials and civil society representatives. Additionally 19 specialist interviews were undertaken, auto-photography and participant observation were used, and documentary evidence such as policy documents and reports was gathered.[2] A qualitative methodological approach was best suited to capturing the complex, multifaceted nature of place as a socio-spatial concept (Holloway & Hubbard, 2001), particularly given the continued lack of research which looks beyond 'official' figures and statistics about informal settlements (Hardoy & Satterthwaite, 1989; see also Mitlin & Satterthwaite, 2013). In contrast, the research used the concept of 'place' to imagine the 'rich and complicated interplay of people and the environment' (Cresswell, 2004: 11).

The research design was informed by ethnographic principles, following a tradition of ethnographic research into urban poverty (discussed in Chapter Three). Ethnography suggests that participating in daily life to varying degrees offers researchers access to everyday activities and symbolic constructions, and thus the opportunity to explore discrepancies between thoughts and deeds (Herbert, 2000: 552), as well as the richness and complexity of human life. If it is accepted that humans create their social and spatial worlds through processes laden with symbolism and meaning, ethnography has the potential to illuminate relationships between structure, agent and geographic context, through examining how

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[1] *Ejidos* are a form of agricultural land owned collectively by farmers under Mexican law. See Chapter Three for more detailed discussion of this form of landholding and its significance.

[2] For an extended discussion of this methodology with a focus on the use of auto-photography, see Lombard (2013b).

different social groups meaningfully define and inhabit space (Herbert, 2000: 551). In this sense, it is ideal for investigating perceptions and processes relating to place and place-making, as '[n]o other methodology enables a researcher to explore the complex connections that social groups establish with one another and the places they inhabit, cultivate, promote, defend, dominate and love' (Herbert, 2000: 564). Here, it enabled an understanding of places as constructed discursively and physically, in order to understand links between social and spatial marginalisation.

In order to contextualise this approach within broader debates, Chapter Two sets out a more detailed critique of approaches to informality, based on a review of relevant theories and related policies, and explores conceptions of 'place' from human geography as offering a potential alternative lens. Chapter Three presents *colonias populares* in Mexico as an example of urban informal settlement, and introduces the two case studies. Chapter Four draws on research carried out in this setting to explore the discursive marginalisation of these neighbourhoods, and Chapter Five shows how residents of these places may respond to and resist this through spatial, social and cultural place-making. Finally, Chapter Six concludes with a reflection on what the idea of place-making brings to understandings of informality, in terms of the reinsertion of residents' lived experiences into relevant discourses, and the understanding of complexity in this context.

2. Constructing informality and ordinary places

Since the 1960s, understandings of urban informal settlements have constantly evolved. Almost since this urban phenomenon was first observed – coinciding with patterns of industrialisation and urbanisation in 1950s Latin America – it has been accompanied by debates about the meaning and extent of urban informality, understood as closely linked to urban poverty.[3] Although since the 1960s many advances have been made in terms of theoretical understandings of these places, and the policy responses that ensue, they are still subject to disproportionate levels of marginalisation, including effects such as discrimination and eviction. The most recent iterations of theoretical debates suggest that in response to the technification of urban poverty, which obscures the narratives of those most intimately affected, researchers must uncover and emphasise the perspective of the poor. Drawing on and extending these debates, this paper aims to broaden understandings of the marginalisation of these places, through a focus on the socio-spatial processes of construction in this setting. In this way, it seeks to uncover both the process of knowledge production, and the limits to existing knowledge.

Drawing in particular on two recent bodies of literature – postcolonial approaches to urban studies which posit the idea of 'ordinary places' in the urban setting, and ethnographic work on urban poverty in informal neighbourhoods – this chapter explores ideas around 'place' from social and cultural geography, as an alternative analytical framework for understanding urban informal settlements. The next section contextualises this within a brief history of particularly influential theories which have had discernible effects on policy and practice relating to informal settlements, as well as on how urban informal settlements are understood and situated theoretically. This is followed by an examination of theories which underpin the empirical aim, and a specifically more detailed exposition of the place-making approach taken in this paper, as an alternative analytical lens for broadening understandings of urban informal settlements.

2.1. Approaches to urban informality

The origins of informality theory relating to human settlement[4] have been located in the Chicago School's descriptions of massive urbanisation in 'Third World' cities in the 1950s and 1960s (AlSayyad, 2004). 'Urban informals' were a type of new city migrant condemned to marginal status (Abrams, 1964), often seen as passive members of a 'culture of poverty' (Lewis, 1967), reinforcing the association of informal housing with 'delinquency, breakdown and general social malaise'

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[3] While urban informal settlements are frequently associated with poverty, it has long been noted that such settlements are not exclusively populated by the urban poor, nor do all urban poor live in informal settlements (e.g. Bromley, 1978). Informal settlements may be seen as part of a wider subset of urban poverty experiences, and offer a starting point for describing poverty in terms of the scale of shelter deprivation in cities (UN-Habitat, 2006: 26); but reducing informal settlements to a manifestation of urban poverty downplays the human agency so fundamental in their construction and constitution. This paper focuses on urban informality rather than urban poverty, while acknowledging the substantial overlap that may exist between the two spheres.

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[4] While there is a substantial body of literature devoted to the informal sector debate regarding work and other economic activities (see for example Hart, 1973; Bromley, 1978; Rakowski, 1994; Perry et al., 2007), here the research focuses on informal settlements as a particular spatial manifestation of informality.

(Hall, 2002: 272–274). In the 1960s and 1970s, this dominant paradigm of marginality was challenged (e.g. Lloyd, 1979; Lomnitz, 1977; Mangin, 1967; Peattie, 1970). Perlman (1976) was particularly influential, arguing that marginality served in Brazil and across Latin America as 'both a myth and a description of social reality' (Perlman, 1976: 242). Contrary to the popular view of the urban poor living in shantytowns characterised by social disorganisation and radical politics, she found that *favela* dwellers were socially well-organised and cohesive, culturally optimistic with aspirations for their children's education and their housing, economically hard-working, and politically neither apathetic nor radical: 'In short, *they have the aspirations of the bourgeoisie, the perseverance of pioneers, and the values of patriots*. What they do *not* have is an opportunity to fulfil their aspirations' (Perlman, 1976: 242–243, original emphasis). In fact, the myth of marginality was used for the social control of the poor, who far from being marginal, were integrated into society 'on terms that often caused them to be economically exploited, politically repressed, socially stigmatized and culturally excluded' (Bayat, 2000 in AlSayyad, 2004: 9).

Also during the 1960s and 1970s, the concept of 'self-help' was developed, referring to housing where the owner-occupier constructs some or all of the accommodation, with or without (professional) help. Turner (1968, 1972) was among the first to suggest that dweller control in housing was important. The lack of government will, resources, and flexibility to provide the right kind of shelter, combined with a great potential resource in the desire, energy and initiative of families to house themselves, led to his prescription of 'greater user autonomy in the provision of housing' (Turner & Fichter, 1972: xi). The idea was widely influential in policy terms, with sites-and-services and upgrading policies implemented in many countries during the late 1960s and early 1970s (Moser & Peake, 1987: 4), but it also generated considerable criticism (e.g. Ward, 1982), particularly due to suggestions that 'self-help releases government from its responsibility to provide adequate housing as a basic need for its low-income population' (Moser & Peake, 1987: 5).

The legacy of 'self-help' was arguably a new era of the privatisation of housing supply, championed by the World Bank, which saw large-scale programmes of tenure legalisation (also known as regularisation or formalisation) promoted by international agencies and national governments across the global South over several decades. The origins of these ideas can be traced back to earlier discredited agrarian land tenure reform experiments linking economic productivity to property rights (Musembi, 2007); meanwhile, in some Latin American countries such as Peru and Mexico, urban land tenure legalisation programmes were instigated in the 1960s and 1970s, in the context of democratisation and poverty reduction measures. More recently, the resurgence of formalisation policies for land and housing has been framed as congruent with 'micro-entrepreneurial solutions to urban poverty', paving the way for further withdrawal of government support (Davis, 2006: 71–72). According to De Soto (2000), whose work is often associated with this approach, provision of legal titles is the solution to informality and poverty: creating property ownership (through titling) and legalisation of assets gives poor people the security of tenure they need to invest in their homes and businesses, and hence invigorate the economy. The prevalence of regularisation programmes in many developing countries, particularly in Latin America, means that evictions and removals have been replaced by relative tolerance of illegal tenure developments. However, such programmes have also been criticised for their over-simplification of complex issues, political usage, and failure to generate expected wealth (Miranda, 2002); ultimately, then, they have not offered a 'solution' to informality.

In fact, some suggest that levels of urban informality are increasing, linked to the liberalisation of cities as one of the consequences of globalisation (AlSayyad, 2004). In this view, urbanisation produces specific spatial structures and forms supporting the (re)creation of social relations necessary for the reproduction of capital, meaning ordinary urban dwellers are marginalised and powerless in the face of mobile capital, part of a new geography of social exclusion 'made up of multiple black holes . . . throughout the planet' (Castells, 1998: 164–165). In globalising cities, this has led to low-income shelter crises, due to contradictions between different housing sub-markets (Shatkin, 2004); more broadly, it concurs with influential analyses framing urban informal settlements as a manifestation of urban crisis. For example, Davis (2006: 15–17) locates the cause of urban informal settlements primarily with the imposition of Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) in the 1980s by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, which made life unsustainable for millions of rural poor, forcing them to move to cities with resultant explosive urbanisation. In this way, 'cities have become a dumping ground for a surplus population working in unskilled, unprotected and low-wage informal service industries and trade' (UN-Habitat, 2003 in Davis, 2006: 175; see also Harvey, 2009).

Thus urban growth accompanied by low levels of economic development is seen as both reflecting and reproducing economic and social crisis (Potts, 2012), despite the fact that it is generally nations with the best economic performance that have urbanised most in the last 50 years, and even while urbanisation often correlates positively with development indicators (Satterthwaite, 2007). However, it is important to recognise that urbanisation processes are not necessarily poverty driven (Obeng-Odoom, 2013). Some suggest that structural reforms may in fact slow urbanisation or improve urban opportunities, challenging the posited link between structural adjustment and informalisation in urban areas. In some cases economic adjustment has led to changing patterns of rural-urban migration, as reforms which favour rural producers promote demographic shifts away from urban areas (Fallon & Lucas, 2002: 30), while return migration offers a strategy to address declining urban prospects (Potts, 2012). However, these claims are relatively untested, and more systematic evidence for internal migration as a response to economic crisis is needed (Fallon & Lucas, 2002). Certainly, in Latin America, observers suggest that the effects of structural reforms have been to perpetuate urbanisation trends originating in the post-war import substitution era, as continued 'massive urban migration attests to a countryside deemed nonviable by neoliberal development models' (Perreault & Martin, 2005: 197). Within Latin American cities, the spatial imprint of neoliberalism can be seen in urban fragmentation and increasing levels of inequality between rich and poor areas, as gated communities exist side-by-side with, but entirely segregated from, informal neighbourhoods (Perreault & Martin, 2005; Bayón and Saraví, 2013).

2.1.1. Urban ethnography, poverty and informality

A response to these debates can be found in ethnographic (and often longitudinal) studies by anthropologists and urban theorists in specific communities, which explicitly connect the production of informal settlements to contemporary debates on urban poverty and globalisation. In particular, studies by Moser (2009), Simone (2000, 2004), Auyero (1999a,b, 2000) and Bayat (2004) explore how global forces exert pressure on local informal settlements through economic crises, structural adjustment, and neoliberal governance, while simultaneously emphasising the importance of local determinants in shaping particular manifestations of liberalisation in specific cities, and their effects on the urban poor. For example, Auyero (1999a: 47) highlights the interaction of rising unemployment, educational exclusion and welfare retrenchment through the lived experience of residents of an informal settlement in Buenos Aires, Argentina, to show how 'these structural processes are perceived and translated into concrete emotions, cognitions and actions by the residents of the slum'. While these processes contribute to increasing marginalisation, they may simultaneously offer opportunities for local urban poor communities to draw on global connections and resources. Cities constitute 'platforms of mediation' through which endogenous groups link to the wider world (Simone, 2004: 18), facilitating development of economic activities via informal international networks (Abdoul, 2005). Thus, in an increasingly globalised setting, the interaction of local and global factors may be the decisive factor in the improvement of living conditions for the urban poor (Auyero, 1999a; Moser, 2009), as the significance of urban informality increases rather than diminishes.

As well as reincorporating local processes into debates about the links between globalisation and urban informality, the detailed empirical research that underpins these studies explicitly challenges stereotypes emerging from essentialist understandings of poverty and informality that still dominate development and urban debates. In response to the 'decontextualisation' and 'technification' of poverty by international agencies (Moser, 2009: 23), ethnographic approaches reveal the heterogeneity of urban poor communities and the informal neighbourhoods they often inhabit, thus highlighting the complexity of measuring, contextualising and responding to urban poverty and informality. Foregrounding the agency of the poor by emphasising the views of urban communities confirms their self-reliance, echoing earlier debates on self-help, and highlighting the 'huge creativity, pride and resilience of poor communities' (Moser, 2009: xvii). This is not to romanticise the situation of poor and informal urban communities; in the context of constraints and powerful elite interests, agency may be characterised by 'quiet encroachment', in the sense of 'largely atomised, and prolonged mobilisation with episodic collective action', rather than organised resistance (Bayat, 2004: 90). However, by highlighting the struggle and negotiation which poor communities engage in to obtain goods and services, usually in urban informal settlements, these accounts 'find ways of making visible urban possibilities that have been crowded out or left diffuse or opaque' in debates that often essentialise the identities of settlement dwellers (Simone, 2004: 14).

Roy (2011: 224) picks up this thread in her incisive yet sympathetic critique of 'subaltern urbanism', which

she locates in accounts of the slum as 'terrain of habitation, livelihood and politics ... [which seek] to confer recognition on spaces of poverty and forms of popular agency that often remain invisible and neglected'. While this paradigm offers an important challenge to apocalyptic portrayals of slums, the political agency assigned to urban dwellers risks attributing them with an essentialist 'slum habitus' (Roy, 2011: 228). Rather than attaching a deterministic informal 'identity' to informal settlement residents, Roy argues we must aim to understand the conditions under which knowledge about slums is produced, in order to understand the gaps in history and representations, 'the limits of archival and ethnographic recognition'; in other words, what is left out of urban theory (Roy, 2011: 231).

The dominance of particular paradigms, based on the privileging of certain circuits of knowledge production, is exemplified by dualistic framings of informality. Whether portraying urban informal settlements as crisis or heroism, such framings tend to view formality as fundamentally separate from informality, implying that formalisation is the 'solution' to informality (Roy, 2005; see also Angotti, 2013; Rodgers, Beall, & Kanbur, 2012). Accounts which portray informality as the opposite of formality tend to negate the reciprocal relationship which often exists between 'informal' and 'formal' sectors. In reality, this relationship is often so messy and tangled as to make the two supposed opposites anything but clearly delineated. This observation is not new (see for example Bromley, 1978; Cameron & Gibson, 2005; Vaiou, 1997); yet it is surprising how these problematic assumptions about informality still endure today, despite years of research and policy. In response, this paper suggests that it is through detailed empirical research into how informal settlement residents are engaged in constructing cities that understandings of urban informality may be broadened.

Precisely, it is through interrogating the relationship between social processes and spatial outcomes that a properly theorised relation between the social and spatial fabric of specific marginalised places can be established. While the above debates emphasise the importance of social relations in the construction of urban informality, usually in a specific place, space as a dimension of informality is frequently present, but rarely foregrounded. One exception is Myers' (2003: 8) study of colonialism and space in urban Africa, which suggests drawing on 'cultural geography's rich tradition of studying the built environment for social meaning' to understand the diverse influences which exert pressure on urban space in the context of marginalisation. By linking processes of marginalisation to urban form, space is employed as a means of understanding the impact of urban policies and interventions, but also the constructive efforts of the urban poor majority, on the urban environment (Myers, 2003).

Informed by this approach, and more broadly by the long tradition of research highlighting the agency of informal urban dwellers, this article uses a focus on place, and specifically place-making, to explore the spatial and social construction of urban informal settlements. This includes their discursive production through knowledge circuits, in order to reveal the role of place in the reproduction of certain stereotypes, as well as resistance to these. Building on the ethnographic studies mentioned above, it emphasises informal settlement residents' agency through detailed qualitative exploration of their individual and collective place-making activities, as a critical driving force for the construction of neighbourhoods and hence cities. This approach allows for an understanding of how specific settlements are discursively constructed from beyond as well as within the neighbourhood; in other words, understanding how dominant discourses at the local and general level construct settlement residents as 'an object to be removed, as an out-of-place population, as the obnoxious and repugnant other, always undeserving and tainted' (Auyero, 1999a: 64). In this way, exploring the discursive construction of specific places in a particular city may reveal both reproduction of and resistance to particular stereotypes relating to urban informality. Linking local discourses to more general understandings of urban informal settlements reveals gaps in existing knowledge, and suggests an 'itinerary of recognition' (Roy, 2011: 299) in support of building theory from the ground up.

This article, then, seeks to contribute to debates by exploring the production of knowledge about urban informal settlements, and foregrounding the link between marginalisation and urban space. Specifically, it draws on debates around 'ordinary cities' which suggest transgressing the limits of knowledge about urban informal settlements in order to move beyond limiting framings; and it responds to recent ethnographic approaches' agenda to emphasise the agency of the urban poor, through a specific place-making focus which foregrounds the spatial dimension of urban informality. Using 'place' in this way suggests an explicitly territorial and hence spatialised understanding of urban informality. Such a perspective suggests rethinking categories of knowledge, based on the everyday as 'the touchstone of radical imaginings

and interventions' (Pieterse, 2008 in Till, 2012: 5). The idea of 'ordinary cities' provides a useful starting point in this sense.

2.1.2. Ordinary cities and the everyday

Robinson (2002: 531–533) has argued for moving away from a developmentalist perspective that views cities of the global South in terms of what they lack, and towards a view of cities as 'ordinary'; in other words, as 'diverse, creative, modern and distinctive, with the possibility to imagine (within the not inconsiderable constraints of contestations and uneven power relations) their own futures and distinctive forms of city-ness' (Robinson, 2002: 546). Her call for the 'decolonisation' of urban studies, in order to 'produce a cosmopolitan, postcolonial urban studies' (Robinson, 2002: 533) has led others to suggest transcending standardised categories by 'bringing into view and theorising a range of ordinary spaces' in the urban setting (Legg & McFarlane, 2008: 7; see also McFarlane, 2008).

The idea of the 'ordinary' or 'everyday' nature of cities offers a potential alternative for understanding urban informal settlements in terms of the processes which construct them and the agency of actors there. Viewing the city as the site of flows and difference, and seeing 'the constant hum of the everyday and prosaic web of practices that makes the city into such a routinely frenetic place', may open up new possibilities for emancipatory potential through 'numerous forms of ordinary urban sociality' (Amin & Thrift, 2004: 232–234). Gilbert's (1994: 90) description of informal settlement consolidation in Latin American cities echoes this, painting a picture of collective efforts to improve individual dwellings which take place in an atmosphere of gaiety, as 'gradually, what began as a sea of shanties becomes a consolidated settlement'. This resonates with the idea of conviviality, 'autonomous and creative intercourse among persons, and the intercourse of persons with their environment' (Illich, 1980 in Peattie, 1998: 247), suggesting the significance of everyday social contact but also of the context or place in which it occurs, and the reciprocal effects that these elements have on each other.

'Ordinary' cities, then, offers a potential alternative for understanding urban informal settlements. Following De Certeau's (1984) suggestion that everyday practices in urban places provide an analytical focus for understanding the city, urban geographers have asserted that 'focusing on the everyday encourages [us] to address the importance of people as more or less autonomous actors who creatively engage with, and shape, their surroundings' (Holloway & Hubbard, 2001:

37). This is all the more important in places commonly categorised as 'disorderly', where a 'peopled approach' may be necessary to disentangle the multiple forces which shape the urban environment, and foreground the agency of the marginalised majority (Myers, 2003: xv).

Drawing on these ideas, a place-based approach to the investigation of informal settlements allows us to understand how they are constructed spatially and socially. It implies understanding them not in isolation but as part of the city in all its complexity. It means recognising that poverty and disorder are not limited to these places, nor are they simply a study in poverty and disorder. Instead, they are places where people live, which may be perceived as under construction or in process, within the wider context of the city. Places are 'the stuff of stories, *part of the little histories of the world*' (Friedmann, 2007: 260, original emphasis), and seeing the world in terms of places means seeing its richness and complexity.

2.2. Urban informal settlements: ordinary places?

Place is understood broadly as spaces that people are attached to, or 'meaningful location' (Cresswell, 2004: 7). In recent years, human geographers have suggested that 'it has become axiomatic ... that as people construct places, places construct people' (Holloway & Hubbard, 2001: 7). As a socio-spatial construct, 'place' is constituted by location, locale, and sense of place (Agnew, 2005). Location relates to the 'where' of a place, often referred to in the everyday use of the word, although this is not necessarily static, as places may be mobile or transient, such as public transport and markets (Jirón, 2008). Locale refers to 'the material setting for social relations – the actual shape of the place in which people conduct their lives' (Cresswell, 2004: 7), or their material form, whether constituted by roads and buildings, walls and doors, or plants and rocks. Sense of place, perhaps the most difficult to capture, is described as 'the subjective and emotional attachment people have to place' (Cresswell, 2004: 7), underpinning the social element of place which has preoccupied human geography more recently.

This implies a relation with power, opening the possibility for contestation and conflict among different understandings and experiences of places, and about the idea of 'place' itself. Indeed, Cresswell (2004: 12) specifies that '[p]lace, at a basic level, is space invested with meaning in the context of power'. Different groups imbue space and place with different meanings, uses and values (Holloway & Hubbard, 2001). As Massey (1991) has pointed out, there is never one single sense of

place which everyone shares, even within the same neighbourhood. Places do not have single, essential identities; rather, there are multiple identities for any given place, which may be a source of richness but also conflict. Cresswell (2004: 51) distinguishes between social constructionist and phenomenological approaches to place, which are particularly relevant in the setting of urban informal settlements, in terms of foregrounding agency and challenging stereotypes. The following sections explore these approaches through a focus on place and lived experience; place and power; and place as process.

2.2.1. Place and lived experience

One of the best-known phenomenological approaches to 'place' is Relph's (1976) *Place and Placelessness*, which sought to respond to abstract discussions of environmental issues that formed the basis of decision-making at that time. As he put it,

> 'distinctive and diverse places are manifestations of a deeply felt involvement for those places by the people who live in them, and ... for many such a profound attachment to place is as necessary and significant as a close relationship with other people' (Relph, 1976: i).

Place attachment derives from a deep association with places, constituting a vital source of individual and cultural identity and security. The conditions for an authentic relationship with place are 'a complete awareness and acceptance of responsibility for your own existence' (Relph, 1976: 78), as the basis for a state of 'existential insiderness'.

Relph was heavily influenced by Tuan, who also saw place as the product of and inextricably linked to experience (Tuan, 1977: 201). According to Tuan (1977: 18), experience of a place is through 'all the senses as well as with the active and reflective mind'. Undifferentiated space becomes place when it is thoroughly familiar to us, through kinaesthetic and perceptual experience, as much as formal learning (Tuan, 1977: 72–73). The almost unconscious, repeated, routine activities that we carry out in our everyday lives contribute to a sense of place and the intimacy of place attachment, although '[a]t the time we are not aware of any drama; we do not know that the seeds of lasting sentiment are being planted' (Tuan, 1977: 143). In fact, people's everyday, incremental investment in a place characterises it.

Phenomenological approaches' emphasis on place as the locus of meaning and indeed, of human existence, offers a human-centred focus and a way of seeing urban informal settlements as sites of complex socio-spatial interaction. Similar to the ethnographic approaches outlined above, the focus on everyday, lived experience emphasises the often-neglected residents' view, and incorporates this into more complex understandings of the city. However, critics suggest that phenomenological approaches are blind to diversity and difference in the experience of place (Cresswell, 2004: 25), exposing their lack of an account of power. Their assumption that everybody has equal claims to place is underpinned by the problematic idea of place as 'essentially a static concept' (Tuan, 1977: 179). In the context of urban informal settlements, place is often anything but static: these places are often conceptualised in the Latin American urban context as places in progress, suggested by the term 'consolidation' ('*consolidación*'), frequently used to describe informal development processes (e.g. Aguilar, 1988; AlSayyad, 1993; Gough & Kellett, 2001), discussed further below. Such neighbourhoods are premised on the idea of change and improvement, captured by the term 'slums of hope' (Lloyd, 1979).

The phenomenological approach outlined above is, then, methodologically useful due to its emphasis on the agentic and experiential elements of human action at the level of specific places, fundamental to constructing informal settlements. However, a critical approach to place in a world of social hierarchies suggests understanding it not simply as an outcome of social processes, but as a tool in the creation, maintenance and transformation of relations of domination, oppression and exploitation (Cresswell, 2004: 29), and ultimately in the production of knowledge about urban informal settlements.

2.2.2. Place and power

Using the concept of place to explore urban informal settlements thus potentially illuminates elements relating to power[5] that may be overlooked in debates on informality and poverty. While multidimensional approaches suggest that power is an important dimension of poverty, particularly relating to the determination of local political and bureaucratic agendas (e.g. Mitlin & Satterthwaite, 2004: 15), analyses of

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[5] According to Foucault ([1982] 2002: 340–341), power is 'a way of acting upon one or more acting subjects by virtue of their acting or being capable of action'; in other words '[a] set of actions upon other actions', which exists only in a relational sense, as exercised by some on others.

informality often refer implicitly to issues of power through a focus on particular forms of power relations, especially between 'the state' and 'the community'. There is still a tendency to take a zero sum or binary view that sees low-income residents as the 'losers' in power relations. Critical geographic approaches to place offer a response to this: by focusing on the complexities of power in place, it may be possible to better understand the intricate, entangled processes relating to power that occur in urban informal settlements. The idea of resistance in response to domination in place underlies critical approaches, suggesting that 'people are able to resist the construction of expectations about practice through place by using places and their established meanings in subversive ways' (Cresswell, 2004: 27).

Sharp, Routledge, Philo, and Paddison (2000) criticise this conceptualisation of resistance, arguing that splitting resistance and domination in this way falls into the orthodox trap of equating 'power' with 'domination'. Instead, these authors argue for a more nuanced understanding of geographies of power, rejecting the binary conception of domination in opposition to resistance, in favour of the messy, spatialised entanglements of 'domination/resistance'. 'Entanglement' suggests the endless circulations of power but also the spatiality of domination/resistance within power, and thus possibilities for change. Here, power is 'conceptualised as an amalgam of *forces*, *processes*, *practices* and *relations*, all of which spin out along the precarious threads of society and space' (Sharp et al., 2000: 20, original emphasis). Neither dominating nor resisting power is total, but fragmentary, uneven and inconsistent, hence the use of the Foucauldian dyad 'domination/resistance', which expresses a reciprocal rather than oppositional or binary relation.

Understanding these entanglements of power requires '[a] thorough grounding in the actual urban landscapes and in the biographies of those who helped shape them, paired with those who live in them and give them meaning' (Myers, 2003: 11), to which a place-based approach is well-suited. In the context of informal settlements, 'power' may mean, in particular, the power to determine place meaning, expectations of what places are for, and what is appropriate behaviour in place. In this sense, it relates to the consolidation of social structures and hierarchies in spatial terms, which may reflect and reproduce processes of marginalisation in support of existing power structures. For example, the 'irregular' nature of many *colonias* in Mexico derives from the sale of *ejidal* land, in the context of an unregulated, private land market sanctioned by the state. This means that residents are dependent on the authorities' decision to legalise their tenure, and thereby regularise their status, affecting which services they can request.

However, residents' activities revealed in the research showed how from the point of land acquisition onwards, they are involved in the everyday appropriation of space, gradually conferring their own meanings onto the formerly agricultural land on which many settlements are located: tracks become streets, overgrown areas are used as football pitches, meetings are held on vacant lots. Meanwhile, residents may be involved in activities which are illegal or semi-legal (such as connecting the neighbourhood to a 'pirate' water supply), while simultaneously initiating formal processes to obtain official services, thus capitalising on existing supply networks and social relations while strategically aiming to improve their long-term situation through formalisation. These lived experiences of informal places thus reveal both resistance to and compliance with structures through which the state attempts to exert its power to order space.

2.2.3. *Place as process*

Another strand of critical geographic approaches conceives of place as process, opening up the possibility that the materialities (or structures) of places influence what people do in them, but that these places are in turn influenced by people's activities and agency. Cresswell (2004: 36) uses the example of a square park with bisecting pathways which people bypass in preference of taking a short cut, walking diagonally across the grass, and eventually creating a mud path. Here, Updike's (1961 in Tuan, 1977: 142) description of '[t]he modest work of human erosion' is called to mind. Pred (1984), in particular, has argued for a disruption of conceptions of place as static, having fixed and measurable attributes. Instead, he emphasises the elements of change and process within place, and sees places as always 'becoming', never 'finished'. Place is 'what takes place ceaselessly, what contributes to history in a specific context through the creation and utilisation of a physical setting' (Pred, 1984: 279). Seeing place as process provides a way of reframing informal settlement dwellers as agents, acting within the constraints of existing structures, but also embodying the possibility of resistance to and even disruption of these structures through incremental change, echoing the suggestion of 'quiet encroachment'.

The idea of place as process, whereby material place is produced by the activities of its users, is extremely

pertinent in global Southern cities, where the proportion of new housing constructed by residents may be as high as 90 per cent (Hardoy & Satterthwaite, 1989: 12). Seeing place as process facilitates increased recognition of the effort that goes into the construction of these places, which remains unrecognised or devalued, despite the long history of debates outlined above. Place as process implies a focus on practice and place as it is performed by the people who use it. It allows a view of urban informal settlements as creative places, the result of social practices. Furthermore, the idea of place as made up of many processes, or as a work in progress, accords with residents' hopes that their neighbourhood will eventually enjoy formal services, proper recognition and full status within the city through 'consolidation'. This does not necessarily imply an end goal of static place – home as place may mean something continually improving, with the ongoing possibility of change.

Taking a procedural view of informality offers a different focus for understanding urban informal settlements. Some theorists assert that rather than viewing informal settlements as physical environments, deficient of basic infrastructure and services, they can be seen 'as complex and changing social processes that play themselves out in intricate spatial arrangements' (Huchzermeyer, 2004: 47). Seeing informal settlements as social processes allows a broader view of these places and the dynamic social and political relations which occur there, as well as more static spatial, technical and legal aspects. Similarly, Roy's (2005: 148) term, 'urban informality', indicates 'an organising logic, a system of norms that governs the process of urban transformation itself'. Here, the standard dichotomy of formal and informal is rejected in favour of the suggestion that 'informality is not a separate sector but rather a series of transactions that connect different economies and spaces to one another' (Roy, 2005: 148).

2.3. A place-making approach to urban informal settlements

These strands of geographic approaches to place are synthesised in the analytical lens of 'place-making', used here to emphasise the socio-spatial processes which construct place, and in particular the social and physical construction of places by people. Place-making has been defined by Schneekloth and Shibley (1995: 1) as 'the way in which all of us as human beings transform the places in which we find ourselves into places in which we live'. The objective of exploring urban informal settlements through place-making is to understand the socio-spatial

processes of construction in this setting, as a response to the gaps in urban theory and the stereotyping of specific types of place through dominant processes of knowledge production. It also serves to emphasise the creative elements of human action, and interaction, which are fundamental to constructing these places, as locations but also as sites of meaning. Elsewhere, place-making has been defined as 'part of an everyday social process of constructing and reconstructing space', both a communicative process and an individual mental one (Burkner, 2006: 2), highlighting its individual and collective dimensions.

Place-making, then, permits a wide view of the influences and processes brought to bear on a place, and its construction in a physical but also social sense, by emphasising that places result 'from the aggregate of many decisions over time' (Goodman, 1972: 242). Place-making captures the incremental nature of place, in that it includes the activities of the many ordinary citizens who pass through, live in, use, build, visit or avoid a place, and are thus involved, directly or indirectly, in its physical and social construction. The analytical use of place-making here seeks to uncover the everyday activities which construct place, as well as more strategic, one-off events, in the context of exploring the socio-spatial construction of urban informal settlements and revealing assumptions underpinning dominant narratives about these places. This also represents an innovative analytical approach in the sense that it brings ideas that have been relatively restricted to global Northern contexts into conversation with debates from the global South.

For example, as a means of understanding the entangled relationship between the social and physical dimensions of urban space, and contesting dominant narratives about place, place-making has been used in the UK context to critique the exclusionary outcomes of urban policy. Porter and Barber's (2006) study of urban regeneration in Birmingham contests redevelopment narratives portraying deprived areas of the city as a 'blank slate' in order to justify their demolition and the displacement of local populations. The authors use place-making to highlight 'non-commercial aspects of life' such as individual and collective memories of place, in response to regeneration discourses that emphasise economic considerations above all else (Porter and Barber, 2006: 227). Similarly, Jones and Evans (2012: 2316) suggest that 'the affective connections between people and spaces' offer an alternative narrative to the design-focused rhetoric of urban policy, exploring how people who have a longstanding association with a particular place experience it as

memory and meaning. As well as highlighting the integral role of emotion in understanding place (Daya, 2011), such perspectives also highlight its temporal dimension, which is often sidelined by policy rhetoric seeking a *tabula rasa* on which to enact redevelopment. In this way, these studies highlight the politics involved in knowledge production about specific places, and the limits of this knowledge; however, this is usually framed within debates around the role of the professional in community development (see also Healey, 2010; Hebbert, 2009; Lepofsky & Fraser, 2003; Sepe, 2013; Sutton & Kemp, 2002).

From within debates on urban development in the global South, some discussion of the notion of place in the context of informality and poverty can be found (e.g. Garau, Sclar, & Carolini, 2005; Mishra, Mazumder, & Suar, 2010; Shatkin, 2004; Stein, 1989), but these accounts rarely explicitly interrogate the issue of 'place' and in particular place meaning in this setting. One notable exception is Hamdi's (2010) 'The Placemaker's Guide to Building Community', which posits place-making as a means of addressing vulnerability, counselling local professionals to pay attention to place meaning and association in communities, as well as location. In this study, place-making is used to understand the meanings assigned to particular places, both by the residents engaged in constructing them, and in terms of the state and other urban actors, which may contribute to the production of knowledge about these places both empirically and more generally as an urban category. However, once again the focus is on professionals engaging with communities, a perspective which precludes prioritising the perspective of communities themselves. A useful addition to this body of literature is Hyrapiet and Greiner's (2012) study of rickshaw pullers in Calcutta, which uses the concept of place to emphasise social construction of the city image, and is discussed further below.

As an analytical concept for exploring the social construction of place, then, place-making has the potential to highlight power as a determining factor in socio-spatial relations across different contexts. Place-making may create relationships between people and places, and to each other, in an empowering way, as it is

> 'a fundamental human activity that is sometimes almost invisible and sometimes dramatic . . . [which] can be done with the support of others or can be an act of defiance in the face of power' (Schneekloth & Shibley, 1995: 1).

As suggested above, place-making's power dimension incorporates the potential for simultaneous resistance *and* domination; going beyond a simplistic binary conception of domination versus resistance, attention to place-making enables a more nuanced perspective on power relations. In viewing place as the site of complex entanglements of power, place-making offers an analytical focus through which to disentangle some of these complexities. Exploring the intricacies of residents' and other actors' place-making activities allows a view of politics and power relations within the neighbourhood – such as conflicts between neighbours – as well as in the city as a whole, such as adjacent neighbourhoods competing for resources; political relations between different levels of government; or differential interventions in particular places. Below, these issues are explored through the themes of place meaning, and the role of the state.

2.3.1. Place-making and place meaning

In an article by Friedmann, place-making is defined as the process of appropriating space in order to create a 'mirror of self' (Cooper Marcus, 1995 in Friedmann, 2007: 259), for example by putting up pictures and laying rugs in a new house or room. At neighbourhood level, this occurs by 'appropriating an already existing "place"' (Friedmann, 2007: 259) through learning about the physical place, getting to know local people, and getting involved in local activities. Through making claims on space with activities such as naming, signifying, taking part in social relations and recurrent rituals, such places become lived in, and 'by being lived in, urban spaces become *humanized*' (Friedmann, 2007: 259, original emphasis). This approach, then, offers a response to overwhelmingly negative, technical or quantitative depictions of urban informal settlements and urban poverty more broadly.

The idea of place as a 'mirror of self' implies that identity is generated through place-making. Certainly, as outlined above, phenomenological approaches understand place to be constitutive of human identity. Place identity has been characterised as 'the "glue" of familiarity that binds people to place' (Bruce Hull, Lam, & Vigo, 1994: 110); or 'a cultural value shared by the community, a collective understanding about social identity intertwined with place meaning' (Harner, 2001: 660). These accounts stress the social and cultural dimension of place: imbuing place with meaning leads to the intersubjective construction of place identity and image, on an individual and societal level. For example, in the case of rickshaw pullers in Calcutta, under threat from urban managers who saw them as outdated in this globalising city, place-making reveals their centrality to the social construction of the city (Hyrapiet & Greiner,

2012). Rickshaw pullers contribute to Calcutta's identity, both in terms of the image of the city (as a vibrant place which has conserved some of its oldest traditions), but also by challenging power structures through transgressing spatial boundaries in their everyday work. In this way, place-making offers an 'itinerary of recognition' of these workers in the city, and their contribution to the construction of place, challenging dominant narratives about the city.

The idea of place meaning as symbolic of individual or collective experience is particularly relevant in the context of urban informal settlements, where incremental building processes which often take place over the course of many years result in houses that are containers of meaning and memory (Kellett, 2002). Much more than just shelter, they express, through their layout, architecture and interior design, ideas about progress, identity and values (Kellett, 2002). To paraphrase Young (1997 in Varley, 2007: 35), place in this setting is important in its representation of effort and ownership, not in terms of private property but 'in the sense of meaningful use and reuse for life'. The physical embodies the social and the cultural, and provides the setting for these aspects of identity. Kellett (2002: 28) remarks that residents' consciousness of their low social position suggests '[t]heir efforts can be interpreted as a striving for dignity and respect'. Thus, place meanings express people's endeavours to transform the places in which they find themselves, on the basis of housing need and economic constraints, into the places in which they live, through everyday social processes of constructing and reconstructing space.

2.3.2. Place-making, planning and the state

As an analytical lens, place-making offers a cross-cutting perspective on activities which are often categorised as *either* formal (such as planning by the state) *or* informal (such as land invasion by settlers). In this way, it offers a wide view of influences involved in the spatial and social construction of place, without resorting to standard binary divisions. A place-making lens offers the potential to see all types of activity as equally valid objects of study in the construction of a particular place, in an effort to move beyond normative judgements often entailed by binary conceptions. It allows a perspective which cuts across scale, to include activities in which individuals, families, streets, committees, neighbourhoods, areas, representatives, municipal departments, and so on may all be involved. The benefit of a place-making perspective is that it values these analytical categories equally: therefore the individual place-making activities of one resident are as

important as those of the city council, in analytical (although not necessarily normative) terms. The focus is provided by place, rather than by pre-ordained typologies or hierarchies of activities.

Conversely, place-making views the processes that occur in urban informal settlements as 'ordinary', in that they potentially occur everywhere. Instead of seeing places according to static categorisations, place-making allows a view of the dynamic tensions that interact in a particular place. It thus avoids the homogenisation of urban informal settlements, by emphasising the situated, context-specific elements and processes of a particular place. In particular, place-making is used here to capture the dimension of creativity and productive energy which is invested by the everyday users and producers of a place. If informality is understood as fluid and located in social processes, informal settlements can be conceptualised as work in progress. As described earlier, these places are usually constructed on the basis of their residents' efforts in acquiring land, building houses, obtaining services and setting up networks. Place-making may provide a way of viewing, reassessing and revaluing residents' productive capacity and effort, which continues to be devalued due to the marginalisation of settlements where it occurs.

Part of the problem relating to the recognition of effort in this context may be the state's inability to acknowledge informal processes as place-making. From an official perspective, the construction of urban places is normally associated with 'planning', and 'participation' in planning, which is formally structured, initiated and implemented. The longstanding association of 'planning' with regulatory systems (Campbell, 2002) means that it frequently fails to account for the multitude of other activities involved in the social and physical construction of place. Place-making, then, offers potential to capture activities involved in the construction of place, which overlap with, go beyond, or fall outside formal 'planning' in this sense.

However, Friedmann's (2007: 260) conception of the role of 'the state' in place-making is worth noting here:

> 'As a collective actor the state can initiate or authorise the erasure of an existing place (e.g. a shanty settlement, a neighborhood slated for clearance) and then turn around to build (or help finance) new housing somewhere else, a project which may eventually evolve into a place that is lived in but until then remains an empty shell. And everywhere, seen or unseen, the state's presence is

felt as a constraining influence on everyday life. The physical context for the patterns and rhythms of neighborhood life is controlled by the state'.

In this view, 'the state' attempts to regulate everyday life in the city, but this in turn 'lead[s] to resistance, contestations and actions that are often formally illegal' (Friedmann, 2007: 261), under which latter heading much informal settlement is perceived to fall. Friedmann (2007: 261) emphasises the productive nature of this interaction between domination and resistance, asserting that 'some accommodations will be made as a place acquires its specific character, shaped not only from within itself but in response to the demands and decision of . . . the state'. The undeniable role of the state in establishing and maintaining regulatory structures in the urban context may, then, be felt through the formulation and upholding of zoning laws; but also in more subtle ways, such as the involvement of residents in formal structures of citizen participation. While some have seen the potential for empowerment through participation (e.g. Arnstein, 1969; Barr, 1995), critics highlight its potentially 'tyrannical' nature (Cooke & Kothari, 2001), as 'a "hegemonic" device used to secure compliance with, and control by, existing power structures' (Taylor, 2001: 137).[6]

2.4. Conclusion

As outlined in this chapter, place-making offers ground from which to view the multiple, complex relationships that exist between individuals, organisations and institutions involved in the social and spatial construction of place. These relationships fluctuate, meaning that at times, certain actors may be more involved, while at other moments, different actors will dominate. Place-making has the capacity to uncover the complexity of social (and hence power) relations contained within the processes which affect urban informal settlements as places. Building on recent ethnographic approaches to urban informality and the idea of 'ordinary' urban places, which seek to emphasise micro-level activities and the agency of those engaged in constructing them, this paper extends these themes by foregrounding the socio-spatial dimension and thus highlighting how places are produced physically and discursively. In this way, it emphasises the importance of local views and

experiences, as well as a global understanding of poverty dynamics.

Different ways of thinking about informality which emphasise dynamic tensions in debates, and the fluidity of concepts according to different contexts, times, places, discourses and so on, suggest potential for seeing urban informality as process, and informal settlements as dynamic, constantly changing places, rather than adhering to static or standardised categorisations. 'Place' offers an alternative analytical lens for understanding urban informal settlements. Given the research objective of exploring the complexity of urban informal settlements through a focus on socio-spatial processes, human geography's understanding of 'place' is extremely relevant. One objective of exploring urban informal settlements through place-making is to emphasise the creative elements of human action, and interaction, which are fundamental to constructing these places, as locations but also as sites of meaning. A focus on place-making is suggested in order to explore lived experiences of urban informal settlements, to connect social relations with spatial construction, and to see how these places relate to the production of knowledge about them, which may have tangible effects for urban residents.

Seeing urban informal settlements as places constructed through the result of multiple influences over time – but especially based on residents' efforts – may reveal them to be as ordinary, and as complex, as anywhere else in the city. In particular, place as a concept foregrounds the link between social and material urban fabric. This allows access to the emotional and psychosocial dimension of the urban environment, often overlooked in urban studies generally, and highlights the territorial dimension of urban informality, particularly relating to stigmatisation (Bayón & Saraví, 2013). In this way, place is a means of exploring knowledge production relating to urban informal settlements, particularly in a discursive sense. It allows for the recognition of collective and individual agency that is central to this project, while also foregrounding how the discursive construction of specific places may permeate at different scales. 'Ordinary places', then, are contextualised within the constraints of power relations; but they also contain the possibility for reinvention, creativity and dynamism. On that basis, this chapter proposes that instead of being seen as the disorderly, illegitimate, 'other' city, informal settlements could be seen as places in their own right, and as places within the wider city. The social, cultural and political processes which influence place-making are inevitably affected by, and reflect, the context where

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[6] For further discussion of participation debates from the fields of urban and development studies, see Lombard (2013a).

Table 1
Poverty and indigence in Mexico, 1980–1999.

	1980			1990			1999		
	House holds	Population		House holds	Population		House holds	Population	
	%	Million	%	%	Million	%	%	Million	%
Poverty	34.0	28.7	42.5	39.3	39.8	47.8	38.0	45.7	46.9
Indigence	11.0	10.6	15.7	14.1	15.6	18.8	13.0	18.0	18.5

Source: Adapted from Graizbord and Aguilar (2006): 93.
Poverty refers to households with a daily income of less than $41.80 Mexican pesos, the minimum estimated family income to satisfy basic needs in 2000. Indigence (or extreme poverty) refers to not having enough income to provide for minimum food requirements.

they play out. The research setting of Mexico has particular implications for how informal settlement takes place there.

3. Urban informal settlements in Mexico: *Colonias populares*

Situated between the United States and Latin America, Mexico is increasingly considered a part of North rather than Central America (Heritage, 2004). With a population of 114 million, it is the second largest economy in Latin America. An upper-middle-income country, its GDP is just ahead of South Korea's. While some effects of global economic crisis have been felt due to dependence on oil exports and links to the US economy (USAID, 2011), its expanding manufacturing sector meant that '[i]n 2011 the Mexican economy grew faster than Brazil's' (Economist, 2012). However, similar to other Latin American countries, Mexico suffers from persistently high levels of poverty; and despite declining income inequality and a relatively stable economy, urban informal settlements (in the form of *colonias populares*) remain a fixture on the Mexican urban landscape. Rapid urbanisation, inadequate formal housing provision and historically high levels of inequality have all contributed to a situation where 'in Mexican cities over one-half of the built-up area began as *colonias*, [which] represent the *only* affordable low-income housing option for over 60 per cent of the population' (Ward, 1999: 4, original emphasis; see also Connolly, Goldsmith, & Mabin, 2003). In this sense, then, Mexico has much in common with other cities of Latin America and the global South more widely, presenting fertile ground for exploring the complexity of urban informal settlements.

The aim of this chapter is to give a broad overview of the context of urban informal settlement in Mexican cities, in terms of macro level factors at the national level, and micro level factors in the specific city of Xalapa. At these two levels, the effects of economic,

political and administrative change are explored. This is followed by an introduction to the two case study neighbourhoods, where a detailed account is given of some basic characterisations according to the residents and secondary sources, in order to contextualise later findings and the interactive construction of the research field between researcher and respondents. The next section outlines the economic, political and administrative changes that Mexico is currently undergoing and their effects on the urban landscape and urban government.

3.1. Mexico's changing urban context

Mexico's urban context has been shaped by political, economic and administrative structures influenced by the legacies of the country's authoritarian era interacting with more recent macro-level processes of neoliberalisation, democratisation and decentralisation. Economic crises in the 1980s and 1990s were accompanied by increasing income inequality, and a decline in living standards for much of the population (see Table 1). Some argue that processes of neoliberalisation[7] adopted as a crisis response have been a causal factor in Mexico's uneven development (Arias Hernández, 2007; Meyers, 2003; Ortiz Flores, 2003). Income distribution in Mexico remains highly unequal: in 2004, the top 10 per cent of the population received 40 per cent of income, while the bottom 20 per cent of the population received three per cent (World Bank, 2004). Despite a 10 per cent decline in poverty from 1993 to 2004, by 2009 47 per cent of the population was living in poverty, and 18.2 per cent in extreme poverty (CONEVAL, 2010). There is evidence of declining

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[7] Neoliberalism is defined as an economic and political project to liberalise trade, privatise state-controlled industries, and introduce market-orientated management to a reduced public sector (Perreault and Martin, 2005: 192).

Table 2
Urban growth in Mexico, 1900–1980.

	Population of 25 largest cities (thousands)	% Of national population	% Increase over previous census
1900	1260	9.2	–
1910	1561	10.3	23.9
1920	1858	13.0	19.0
1930	2529	15.3	36.1
1940	3345	17.0	32.3
1950	5706	22.2	70.6
1960	10,526	30.2	84.5
1970	16,919	34.5	60.7
1980	26,504	38.7	54.0

Source: Gilbert and Varley (1989): 17.

overall income inequality since 1996: from 1996 to 2010, Mexico's Gini coefficient for the distribution of household income per capita fell from 0.547 to 0.475 (Lustig, Lopez-Calva, & Ortiz-Juarez, 2012: 136). Accompanied by a reduction in urban income inequality, this suggests a broad tendency of increasing equality (Hamill, 2005). However, the uneven effects of neoliberal policies across regions and sectors are illustrated by country-wide protests in 2007 at escalating food prices due to the removal of trade tariffs (Arias Hernández, 2007). The disparity between the poverty rate of 21.1 per cent in Baja California Sur, Mexico's richest state, and that of 76.7 per cent in Chiapas, Mexico's poorest state (US Embassy, 2010), points to wide variation in regional development patterns, with the north more urban and industrialised, and the south less developed and characterised by agriculture.

Mexico's transition to democracy is relatively recent, with the country's first democratic elections held in 2000, preceded by the gradual decline of the PRI regime during the 1970s and 1980s. Three main parties (the PRI, the centre-right PAN, and the left-wing PRD[8]) now dominate the political scene. Federalism and decentralisation have accompanied democratisation, as improved electoral competition and transfer of fiscal and political powers since the 1980s have led to greater autonomy at subnational levels of government (Camp, 2003; Guarneros-Meza, 2009; Rocha Menocal, 2005). These processes of neoliberalisation, democratisation and decentralisation have influenced patterns of urban growth.

Fig. 1. *Colonias populares* in Mexico City.
Source: Melanie Lombard (2007).

Mexico is an urban nation, with around 75 per cent of its population living in urban areas (Heritage, 2004). From 1950 to 1980, rapid unplanned urbanisation occurred, mainly due to high levels of rural-urban migration accompanying industrialisation and economic growth (see Table 2). Faced with explosive urban growth, formal housing provision in Mexico has struggled to meet demand, leading to the prevalence of *colonias populares*, seen in Fig. 1. *Colonias populares*, characterised by cheaply acquired land, inadequate infrastructure, and self-help dwelling construction (Ward, 1999), are often developed on former agricultural land. Despite initially poor physical conditions, they have comparatively good prospects for upgrading and 'gradually integrating . . . into the physical fabric of the city' (Ward, 1999: 4), through consolidation processes. *Colonia* residents normally demand land titles and public services through petitioning via official channels, a process seen by some as demand-making, which 'very often constitutes a long and frequently unsuccessful activity for residents' (Aguilar, 1988: 42). Faced with the vast scale and intractable nature of *colonias populares*, governments have recently focused on responding to infrastructure needs and regularisation of land tenure to encourage investment (Ward, 1999). The prevalence and form of *colonias populares* in

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[8] Respectively, Partido Revolucionario Institucional or Institutional Revolutionary Party; Partido de Acción Nacional or National Action Party; and Partido de la Revolución Democrática or Democratic Revolution Party.

Mexico relates to characteristics of specific legal and regulatory structures there, namely land markets based on the *ejidal* system, and planning and housing policies.

3.1.1. The role of the ejidos

Observers generally agree that *ejidal* land has been the most important source of land for development in Mexican cities, usually developed illegally (Austin, 1994; Varley, 1998). An *ejido* comprises of land owned communally by farmers under Mexican law dating from the agrarian reforms of the 1920s and 1930s. In 1997, *ejidos* constituted 55 per cent of the total land area of Mexico (Siembieda & Lopez Moreno, 1997: 658). Prior to reforms in the 1990s, collectively owned *ejidal* lands were inalienable. However, increasing rural poverty and migration, and the consequent sale of *ejidal* land (Velázquez Álvarez, 2007a) meant that by the time of reforms in 1992,[9] much *ejidal* land had already been sold illegally for urban expansion and low-income housing. *Ejidal* land is normally sold through subdivision, often at low prices due to its lack of infrastructure (Siembieda & Lopez Moreno, 1997). In the most common form of land sale, settlers buy land from *ejidatarios* (directly or via intermediaries) in transactions which are 'non-existent' in law (Azuela & Duhau, 1998: 159).

The widespread illegal development of the *ejidos* has led to the creation of 'a large federal and state bureaucracy responsible for the post hoc regularisation of former *ejidal* land' (Austin, 1994: 427). Land tenure regularisation has become a routine form of state intervention in low-income housing, through one of the most ambitious and long-established tenure regularisation programmes in the world, which by the 1980s had benefited more than 1.3 million residents in Mexico City alone (Azuela & Duhau, 1998). CORETT (the Commission for the Regularisation of Land Tenure), the federal agency with responsibility for regularising *ejidal* land, was established in 1974 (Azuela & Duhau, 1998). The systematic use of regularisation from the 1970s onwards has been seen as a strategy to bring about the social and political integration of the urban poor (Varley, 1998) and peaceful urban development (Austin, 1994) through the co-optation of opposition movements (Azuela & Duhau, 1998). Regularisation has also protected the illegal land market, thereby reducing state control of urban expansion, and has had the apparently contradictory effect of promoting illegality at the same time as removing it (Azuela & Duhau, 1998).

3.1.2. Planning and spatial policies

Beyond regularisation, a number of other regulatory frameworks affect low-income housing in Mexico, mostly laws enacted first at the national level, then potentially adopted by the 32 sovereign states, for application at state and municipality level (Ward, 1999).[10] These include the Human Settlements Law, the Federal Housing Law, and the Subdivisions Law. Finally, the Urban Development Law gives general guidance on planning and urban development policy. The first Human Settlements Law was formulated in 1976, along with the foundation of SAHOP (the Ministry of Human Settlements and Public Works) which created the first National Urban Development Plan (PNDU), published every five years (Leal de la Macorra, 1998). Since the 1980s, responsibility for urban development plans has been decentralised to all levels of government. The federal department currently responsible for urban planning in Mexico is the newly created SEDATU, the Ministry for Agrarian, Territorial and Urban Development, established by the incoming PRI government in early 2013.

As suggested by this complex legal framework, planning in Mexico tends to be fragmented and disparate, focusing heavily on quantitative rather than qualitative outcomes, and economic factors above all else (Connolly et al., 2003; Leal de la Macorra, 1998). Despite decentralisation, public policy remains highly centralised in practice, and 'as a result, the urban and social agendas of different levels of government are often competing rather than complementary, and are always insufficient to meet demand' (Connolly et al., 2003). To address this, the PNDU 1995–2000 identified as a key strategy 'the need to upgrade and improve the human and financial administrative capacities of local government, particularly in the land development area' (Jones & Ward, 1998: 87). Several measures for local municipalities were outlined, such as updated land records and registry, more efficient systems of building

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[9] Under President Salinas de Gortari, the 1992 amendment of Article 27 of the Constitution reformed the *ejidal* system. Based on a census of *ejidal* land, PROCEDE (the *Ejidal* Rights Certification Programme) assigned formalised titles to all owners, giving them the right to legally sell, but not subdivide their land parcels (subject to the approval of the *ejido's* general assembly) (Austin, 1994). Despite predictions that reforms would end illegal land development, research carried out in the mid-1990s indicated that it was 'business as usual' (Jones and Ward, 1998: 82).

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[10] As a federal republic, Mexico is administratively and politically divided into 32 states and more than 2400 municipalities.

permits, greater transparency and accountability, and official 'civil service' positions in planning and registry offices (Jones & Ward, 1998: 87). However, the continued lack of municipal modernisation in many areas across Mexico hampers this bid for improved governance at the local level (Jones & Ward, 1998).

3.2. Colonias populares in Xalapa

Xalapa, the city where the research was carried out, offers a specific setting in which to explore some of the issues outlined above. Xalapa is a medium-sized city with a population of 457,928 (INEGI, 2010), the capital of the State of Veracruz, located in the east of Mexico (see Fig. 2). As the State capital, Xalapa functions as a regional administrative, commercial and financial centre (Amezcua Cardiel, 1990). Due to a relative absence of any manufacturing industry, Xalapa's economy is mainly based on the commerce and service functions of the tertiary sector (see Fig. 3). This employs the majority of the city's workforce, specifically in property and government bureaucracy (Meyers, 2003).
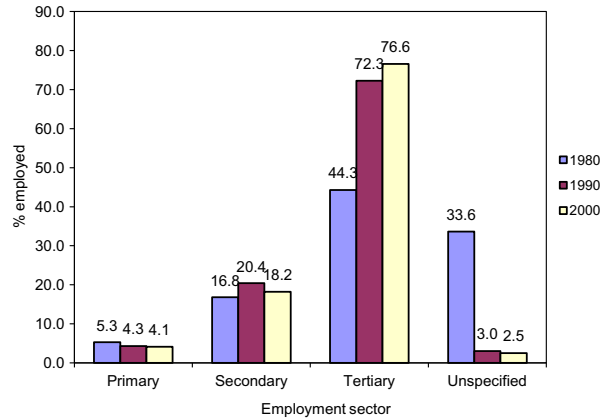
Fig. 3. Economically active population by employment sector in Xalapa, 1980–2000.
Source: Villanueva Olmeda and Ramirez Melgarejo (2002): 18.

As the capital of Veracruz, Xalapa has experienced significant growth since the 1960s (see Table 3). Since the 1980s, increasing numbers of 'rural refugees of economic reform' (Meyers, 2003: 77) have added to its population. The influx of people arriving from the surrounding rural areas contributed to an increase in the city's population from 205,000 to 336,000 from 1980 to 1995, of which 50 per cent was due to migration (Meyers, 2003). The result of economic downturns due to the structural adjustment and financial crises of the 1980s and 1990s was the informalisation of Xalapa's economy. This in turn led to worsening living conditions and declining health for the majority of the population, which meant acute social and economic crisis for many (Meyers, 2003). In 1990, nearly 62 per cent of the workforce earned less than twice the minimum wage, the level of income calculated as sufficient for basic needs (Meyers, 2003). In 2005, 58 per cent of the population earned below this level (INEGI, 2005).

As well as the effect on the wage economy of Xalapa, these developments have meant an expansion of *colonias populares*, particularly in the north and east of the city (see Fig. 4). In 1990, 50 per cent of the city's population lived in *colonias*: 39 per cent of households were without water in their homes, and 37 per cent were not connected to the municipal sewerage system (Meyers, 2003). In

Fig. 2. Location of Xalapa in Veracruz State.
Source: www.oocities.org 2012.

Table 3
Total population growth for Xalapa and Veracruz State, 1950–2000.

	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000
Veracruz State	2,040,231	2,727,899	3,815,422	5,387,680	6,228,239	6,908,975
Municipality of Xalapa	59,275	78,120	130,380	212,769	288,454	390,590

Source: Adapted from Villanueva Olmeda and Ramirez Melgarejo (2002): 15.

Fig. 4. *Colonias populares* in the northeast of Xalapa.
Source: Melanie Lombard (2006).

local discourses and media, *colonias populares* are often portrayed as having been a determining factor in the city's perceived urban crisis of the last few decades, part of a pattern of rapid, uncontrolled expansion that has led to Xalapa being considered 'a city of invasions' (Zavaleta, 2009) which is 'suffering the ravages of growth without planning' (Velázquez Álvarez, 2007b). However, the cityscape reflects not only rapid urban growth and high levels of poverty, but also the speculative development of the real-estate owners, in 'a pattern of social and spatial segregation typical of capitalist urbanisation' (Meyers, 2003: 73).

As part of the government response to urban expansion, a planning process was introduced, replacing past strategies of regulating land usage through control of zoning building permits, regularisation of land tenure and selective investments in infrastructure and services (Meyers, 2003). The first Municipal Plan was published in 1982, alongside legislation aimed at regulating the informal land market. However, the Municipal Office of Urban Development (DGDU), which has responsibility for municipal planning, is under-resourced (Wanda Santos 18.07.06). Around 95 per cent of informal development in the municipality is on *ejidal* land, with the remaining five per cent on private land (Wanda Santos 18.07.06). In the context of economic crises and a shrinking state sector, cuts in federal subsidies to the municipality have meant that regularisation of informal settlements has become a critical policy for the municipal government, based on the incorporation of residents into the city's tax base (Meyers, 2003). In this setting, two case study *colonias populares* were identified as representative of patterns of informal urban development in Xalapa: Colonia Loma Bonita and Colonia Moctezuma (see Fig. 5), based on selection criteria outlined in

earlier chapters, including the neighbourhood's identification as a *colonia popular*, peripheral location and length of time established. As discussed earlier, the objective of selecting two case studies was less in support of a direct comparative approach, and more in the interest of highlighting common and divergent features of informal neighbourhoods in the wider context of Xalapa, underpinning the paper's aim to unsettle assumptions underlying understandings of urban informal settlements using a place-making approach.

In this setting, a qualitative, semi-ethnographic methodology was applied, as outlined in Chapter One. Ethnographic methods excel in providing 'thick description' and 'stories' on the basis that people and their realities are different (Cloke et al., 1991). These methods are therefore well-suited to the exploration of place as a subjective concept, but also provide a level of detail that can be used to reconstruct narratives of a particular neighbourhood and its history. The information in the following sections derives mainly from observation, interviews and informal conversations with residents, as well as some secondary sources where available. By sketching out some basic details of each neighbourhood according to these sources, the accounts below offer context for later chapters' exploration of their discursive construction in the setting of Xalapa, but also reveal the construction of the research field by the residents themselves, and start to indicate potential points of dissonance between 'official' and residents' accounts.

3.3. Case study I: Colonia Loma Bonita

Secondary sources for Loma Bonita were scarce at the time of the research. A study carried out by the Municipal Office of Urban Development for the purposes of regularisation existed (DGDU, 2006), but there was no official map of the settlement. A map of the street layout was produced by community leaders for the regularisation process, but a copy proved impossible to obtain.[11] The neighbourhood is marked on maps of Xalapa, but with very vague topology. A map of the neighbourhood was compiled based on information gathered (Fig. 6). This included a hand-drawn map by a young resident, shown here alongside an aerial photograph (Fig. 7). This map is particularly interesting

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[11] The difficulty of obtaining a copy of this map derived partly from the small number of copies in existence, and partly from the somewhat secretive nature of the Casa Blanca Democratic Association, a civil society organisation based in the area, which was assisting residents with their regularisation petition.
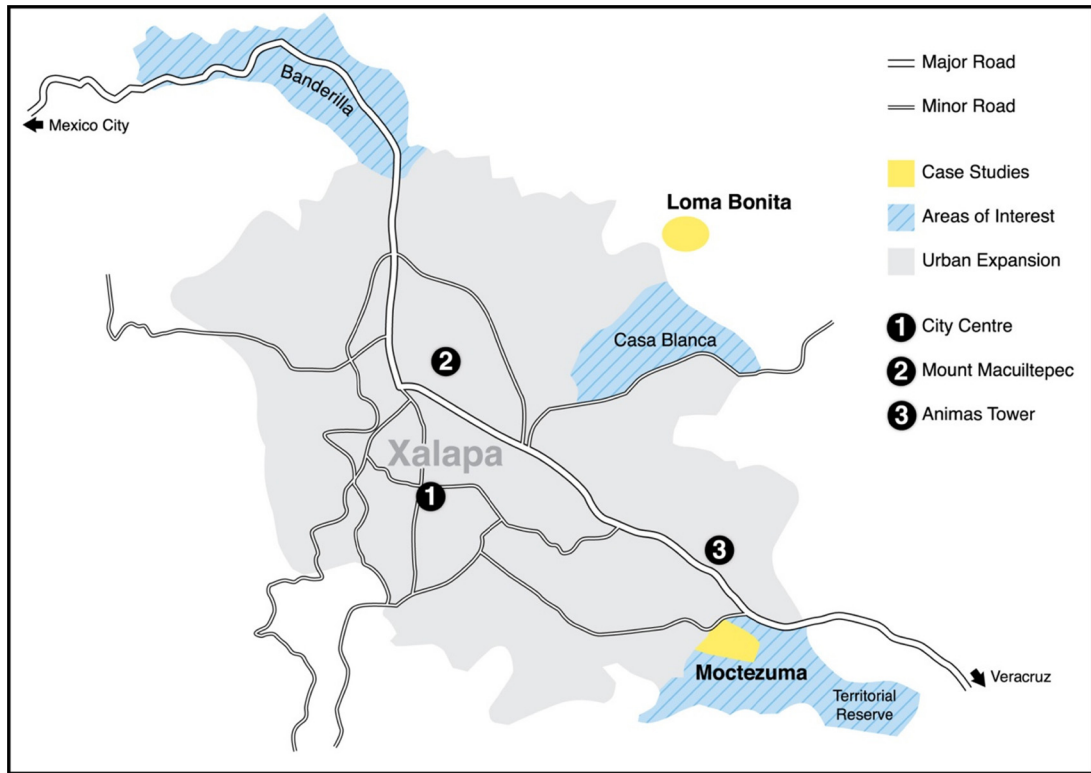
Fig. 5. Map of Xalapa showing location of case studies.
Source: Author's own elaboration.

for what it highlights, emphasising the importance of shops, schools and the football pitch as significant aspects of place for this resident – social aspects which are not obvious from the accompanying aerial photograph.

3.3.1. Location and appearance

Typical of many *colonias populares* in Xalapa and more generally, Colonia Loma Bonita was founded on *ejidal* land. It is a small settlement, established in 1998, which now houses around 35 families (see Fig. 8). It is located on the northeastern outskirts of Xalapa, an hour by bus from the city centre. At first sight, Loma Bonita appears more rural than urban, populated by small, well-spaced dwellings dotted around a circuit of roughly traced roads. In terms of land titles, it is legally still part of the Ejido Chiltoyac, the *ejido* to which the land originally belonged. However, most current residents have obtained 'use rights'.[12] The

neighbourhood is in process of regularisation, and is registered with the Municipality of Xalapa.

Loma Bonita consists of 11 blocks (*manzanas*), with a total of 119 lots whose surface areas vary from 105 square metres to 536 square metres (DGDU, 2006). Most houses are fairly small, with one floor, and built with mixed materials, including wood, breezeblock, tin, cardboard, concrete and glass. About half have concrete internal floors, while the rest have dirt floors. The level of occupation in the neighbourhood has been calculated at 65 per cent in terms of total occupied land surface (DGDU, 2006), but it is probably much lower, as there are many unoccupied lots, often with buildings in *obra negra*[13] which serve to demonstrate ownership of the land so that it is not invaded or expropriated (as seen in Fig. 9).

3.3.2. Origins and settlement

The neighbourhood's origins demonstrate the complex and potentially conflictive circumstances which

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[12] On the basis of a semi-legal transaction in which the buyer pays for papers which cede use rights of the land to them (*cesión de derechos*); however, these are not legally recognised.

[13] Structures under construction, normally comprising foundations, walls and a roof, but unfit for habitation.
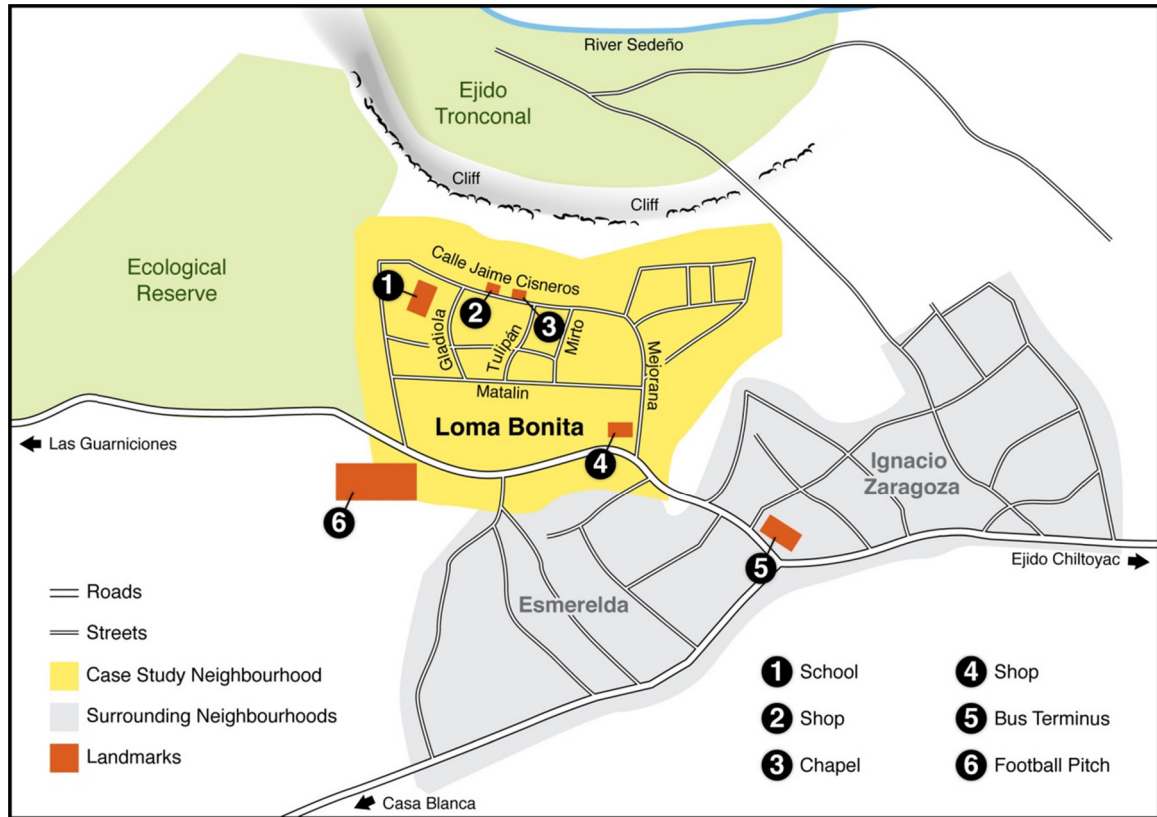
Fig. 6. Map of Loma Bonita and surrounding area.
Source: Author's own elaboration.

surround development on *ejidal* land.[14] Camelia, a housewife in Loma Bonita who was one of the first settlers along with her husband, recounted how the original landowner, an *ejidatario* from the Ejido Chiltoyac, sold the parcel of agricultural land to an intermediary or '*coyote*' in 1998. He then marked out a rough system of plots and sold lots to individuals organised in groups through public meetings in a nearby neighbourhood, Las Higueras (Camelia 16.03.07). In this case, the intermediary fraudulently sold some plots to more than one group. The first settlers were a group of six related families originally from Martínez de la Torre, a small municipality in the central zone of Veracruz State. Led by Don Carlos, they arrived and started building in 1998, according to Leon, a

community leader and agricultural worker (Leon 22.03.07), mostly around the upper area of the neighbourhood and the main street (see Fig. 10). The land was still covered in sugar cane crops, and they had to clear their own plots, and mark out and clear streets (Camelia 16.03.07). They also initiated the process of requesting services.

Meanwhile, conflict arose as the fraudulent land sale came to light when more settlers arrived to take possession of their land, resulting in the same plots being contested by several claimants. This situation reached crisis point in 2000 when a second group of settlers arrived to take possession of plots that were already settled, and threatened existing residents with violence. Although a violent outcome was avoided, the issue arose again in 2007, when accusations of fraudulent land sale led to the arrest and imprisonment of several people allegedly involved with the intermediary (who had long since disappeared), including Don Carlos, the local leader.

More recent arrivals have bought land from a community leader in the adjacent neighbourhood

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[14] The following account of the neighbourhood's origins is from an interview with local community leader Don Benedicto (Benedicto 27.03.07), except where otherwise indicated. Interviews where the interviewee is denoted by their first name indicate semi-structured interviews. All names of respondents are pseudonyms, and all translations from interviews are by the author.
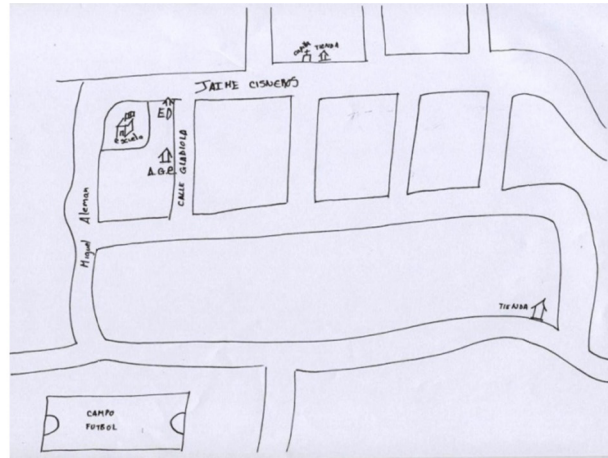
Fig. 7. Aerial view of Loma Bonita and hand-drawn map by resident.
Source: Google Earth and residents of Loma Bonita (2007).

Fig. 8. Panorama of Loma Bonita from lower road.
Source: Melanie Lombard (2007).

Ignacio Zaragoza; or through regular land sale meetings, still held in nearby areas. The neighbourhood's status, lacking formal titles and services while awaiting regularisation, may account for the low levels of occupation compared to ownership according to Isaac

and Eliza, a resident married couple who are involved in the organisation of the local football pitch and team (Isaac and Eliza 20.05.07): people who have bought plots are awaiting regularisation before building and moving in, as regularisation is perceived to precede the

Fig. 9. Loma Bonita from the lower road.
Source: Melanie Lombard (2006).

Fig. 10. Main street (Calle Jaime Cisneros) facing east.
Source: Melanie Lombard (2007).

Fig. 11. Pipes on access road/entering Loma Bonita.
Source: Mauro Castro (2007), Melanie Lombard (2007).

arrival of services. Residents estimated the level of occupation at the time of the research as between 35 and 40 households (Leon 22.03.07; Joaquin 26.02.07), while community leader Benedicto estimated that there were 100 residents in total (Benedicto 27.03.07), suggesting an average of 2.6 people per household.

3.3.3. Infrastructure and services

The neighbourhood has the most basic informal services, but residents suffer from inadequate infrastructure. At the time of the research, it was supplied by a water system constructed by the residents themselves, as recounted by community leader Benedicto. In 2000, they bought a water tank between them, and connected this to a water inlet two kilometres down the access road, using tubing donated from the Municipal Water and Drainage Commission (CMAS), authorised by the Municipality (Benedicto 27.03.07) (see Fig. 11). At the time of the research there was no electricity supply in the neighbourhood, meaning there is no public lighting or telephone service; residents were awaiting a response from the Veracruz Institute for the Promotion of Regional Development (IDERE) to their petition for connection to the existing electricity supply of nearby neighbourhood Las Guarniciones. There is no drainage or sanitation service, and many residents use septic pits.

Most of the streets were unpaved at the time of the research, and the access road, the Antiguo Camino a Chiltoyac, was unsurfaced from about two kilometres before Loma Bonita. The main street, Calle Jaime

Cisneros, was levelled and given a temporary covering by residents using local authority machinery when they first arrived, but it has not been maintained and is in poor condition. The sole bus route serving the neighbourhood takes over an hour from the city centre to the terminal in Ignacio Zaragoza, a 10-minute walk from the main street in Loma Bonita (see Fig. 12). If it rains, the bus service stops at El Sumidero, two kilometres down the road. At the time of the research, there was no refuse collection service, and most residents burned their rubbish, or dumped it outside the neighbourhood (Leon 22.03.07). Residents had petitioned for a regular collection service, but although

Fig. 12. Bus terminal in Ignacio Zaragoza.
Source: Melanie Lombard (2007).

officials had made promises, it had not been implemented.

At the time of the research, there was no primary or secondary school in Loma Bonita, but the school building, originally constructed in 2000 in collaboration with the Municipal Government, was being used as a kindergarten. A primary school was operating in Ignacio Zaragoza, but conflict over this meant that many residents from Loma Bonita chose to send their children to school further away in El Sumidero (an issue discussed in more detail in Chapter Five). The nearest private health service for residents was in *Farmacias Plus* in Avenida Chedraui, 20 minutes away by bus, but those who could not afford to pay had to travel to a free charitable service in the city centre. For recreation, the neighbourhood has a football pitch at its far corner, which residents cleared (Isaac and Eliza 20.05.07). The neighbourhood additionally has one green area and a dedicated area for community facilities, both of which require clearing (DGDU, 2006).

3.3.4. Social and economic aspects

Among adults of working age, the main income generator seems to be paid agricultural work, such as clearing land and harvesting crops. This is often seasonal, regional work, meaning that workers are away from home for long periods of time. Competition for scarce jobs, piecework and low levels of pay mean seasonal workers are vulnerable to unstable incomes. Several residents mentioned relatives who had migrated 'to the other side' ('*al otro lado*') of the United States border, seeking work there. Some residents had paid employment in the city centre, as shop assistants, cleaners or vendors. Several households kept animals such as pigs, chickens and ducks as a source of subsistence and income. Some residents used empty land for subsistence crops such as maize and beans.

In general, incomes appeared to be low, evidenced by housing materials, and other living conditions. Some of the poorest families in the neighbourhood received assistance from the federal welfare programme *Oportunidades*, in the form of subsidised provisions and other necessities, and charitable assistance from the religious initiative *Caritas*, and from local churches (Macarena 14.03.07). The two small shops in the neighbourhood were owned by residents, but there were few other local businesses in evidence. The *tortilla* man passed through on a moped daily, from a *tortillería* in one of the nearest adjacent neighbourhoods. In the adjoining neighbourhood, Esmerelda, there was a construction material company (see Fig. 13). One of the residents mentioned that she used to cut hair for

Fig. 13. Construction business in Esmerelda.
Source: Melanie Lombard (2007).

children in the neighbourhood free of charge, but there appeared to be little more in the way of services.

The above narratives, collated from residents' accounts and secondary sources, suggest that Loma Bonita is in many ways a 'typical' *colonia popular*, developed on *ejidal* land with relatively insecure tenure by residents who are in their majority poor. Its peripheral location and lack of services reflect the low cost of land in the area, which in turn affects the neighbourhood's socio-economic complexion. On the other hand, evidence of speculation based on ownership without occupation indicates connectedness to local land markets. The neighbourhood's low levels of consolidation may be due to existing residents' lack of resources, a factor mentioned by many of them. However, there appear to be social and political issues relating to self-organisation, leadership, and conflict within the neighbourhood (as well as with other neighbouring *colonias*). While a superficial examination of Loma Bonita confirms that it exhibits some 'typical' features of urban informal settlements, questions are raised about the specific social, political and cultural processes that connect it to the wider city. These questions will be returned to in subsequent chapters on the discursive construction of place and resident place-making. The next section turns to the second case study neighbourhood, exposing some of the differences and similarities that occur across these two informal settlements.

3.4. Case study II: Colonia Moctezuma

There was greater availability of secondary sources of data on Moctezuma, due to its more established nature. The main sources of secondary information were a report
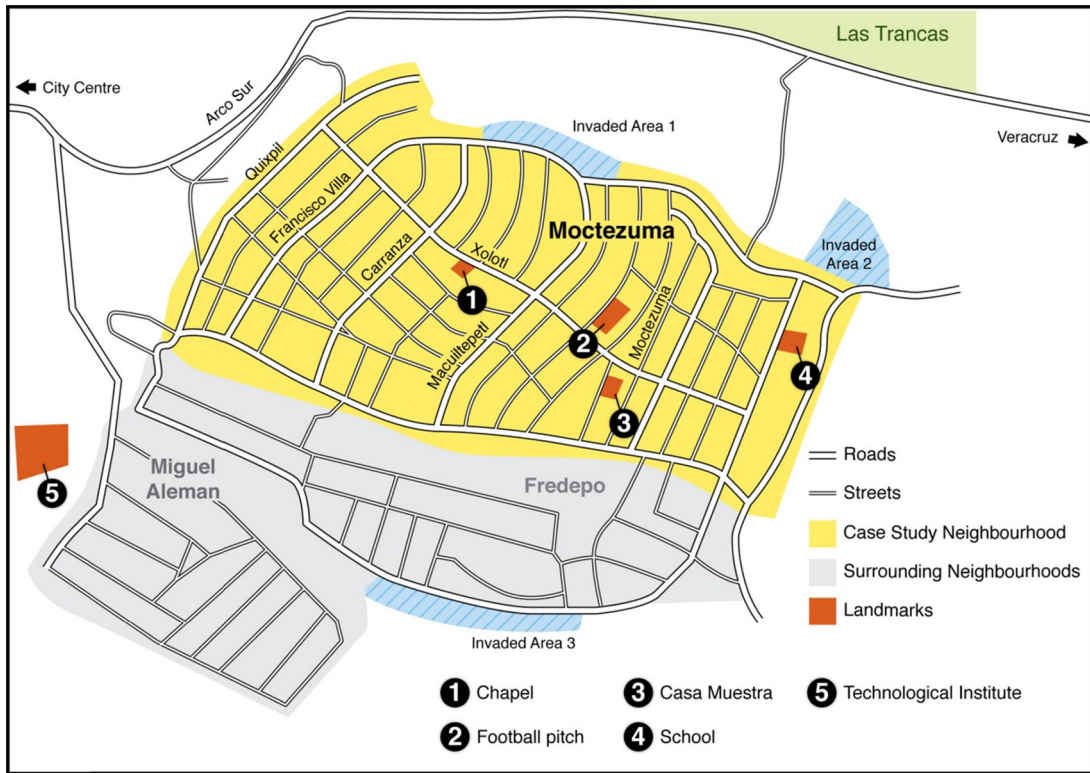
Fig. 14. Map of Moctezuma and surrounding area.
Source: Author's own elaboration.

from the *Programa Habitat*[15] carried out in Moctezuma by the Office of Public Works, as part of a process of self-diagnosis by the residents (DGOP, 2005), and a report written by a French researcher in collaboration with local organisation UCISV-Ver[16] (Turpin, 2006). All other information came from interviews with residents and observation. A map was compiled for the purposes of the research, based on the information gathered (Fig. 14), complementing residents' own representations of the neighbourhood, seen in Fig. 15 alongside an aerial photograph. During the process of compiling this map at a focus group session, the lack of clear consensus over the neighbourhood's boundaries emerged as a notable element of discussions. This may be the result of the neighbourhood's incremental and non-linear processes of development.

3.4.1. Location and appearance

In contrast to Loma Bonita, Colonia Moctezuma is a relatively established neighbourhood. It is unusual, in the context of Xalapa and more generally, in that it was developed legally on land purchased by the State Government rather than directly through the illegal sale of *ejidal* land, meaning that most residents have had legal tenure of their plots since soon after acquiring them. However, the neighbourhood is typical of *colonias populares* in Xalapa, in that it developed through processes normally associated with informal settlements, including self-build housing and petitioning for services. Moctezuma is located in the southeast of Xalapa, about 30 min from the city centre by bus. It is a relatively large settlement, with a population of between 3000 and 5000.[17] It has a discernible street layout and fairly dense habitation. Moctezuma is

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[15] A federal programme administered at local level by various departments, which involves resident participation in identifying and resolving the problems in a particular neighbourhood.

[16] UCISV-Ver is a local housing support organisation offering loans, assistance and technical advice to low-income households in Veracruz State. It originated in the 1980s as an urban social movement based in Xalapa.

[17] According to the 2000 census, Moctezuma's population was 2806 (Turpin, 2006: 41), while during the research, a local leader estimated it to be closer to 5000 (Federico 14.02.07). This discrepancy may be partly due to uncertainty about the neighbourhood's exact boundaries, and rapid growth.
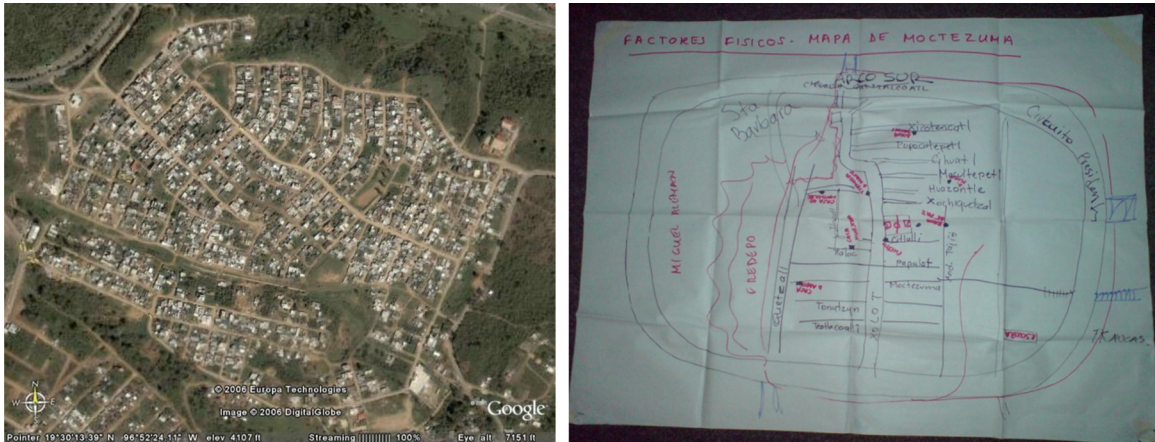
Fig. 15. Aerial view of Moctezuma and collective map drawn by residents in focus group.
Source: Google Earth and residents of Moctezuma (2007).

considered to be well-located, with several higher education institutions nearby, and ongoing development in the surrounding area including a new commercial centre and government office buildings.

The neighbourhood's relative density and level of development lend it a consolidated appearance, along with the abundance of shops and services along the main street, Calle Xolotl (see Fig. 16). But many houses are still under construction; there are uninhabited plots on almost every block; and the lack of greenery and paving makes it arid in the heat, and muddy when it rains. According to residents, Moctezuma now is the result of years of struggle, which are not yet over: for example, not all houses are connected to the sewerage network. Housing quality and size vary greatly. The predominant building materials are breezeblock, cement and brick, but a noticeable proportion of

Fig. 16. Main street (Calle Xolotl) facing south.
Source: Melanie Lombard (2006).

dwellings use materials such as tin and wood. Most housing is owner-occupied, but there is a growing rental market. The steep, inconsistent topography has meant that settlers encountered increased difficulty and expense in dwelling construction and service installation.

3.4.2. Origins and settlement

The origins of the neighbourhood are atypical in that the residents did not originally suffer from insecure tenure, but many of the development processes are in line with the 'consolidation' that *colonias* are perceived to undergo. According to some accounts, Moctezuma was first settled in 1990, as an invasion of agricultural land on the outskirts of Xalapa by a group of displaced people, the victims of a fraudulent land transaction elsewhere in the city (DGOP, 2005). Following pressure on the Municipal Government by these settlers, the land was formally acquired by the Veracruz State Government in the early 1990s. Moctezuma was officially established in 1993, as part of the Xalapa Land Reserve (the *Reserva Territorial Xalapa*) created by the Veracruz State Government (DGOP, 2005). Plots for residential use were granted by the State Heritage Department to political groups involved in the urban social movement such as MOPI[18] and the PRD. The remaining plots were granted to individual applicants.

When it was first settled in 1990, the land was uncleared and covered with greenery, meaning settlers had to clear the land and cut paths through the

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[18] The Workers' Independent Movement, a political group involved in Xalapa's urban social movement.

Fig. 17. Moctezuma from neighbouring *colonia* Fredepo.
Source: Melanie Lombard (2007).

undergrowth (DGOP, 2005). When the State Government acquired the land, it cleared the remainder in order to mark out streets and lots, until there was almost no vegetation (Turpin, 2006: 24). Despite promises that land would be granted as serviced lots, it was delivered as unserviced terrain, lacking basic infrastructure. Residents had to construct their own dwellings and obtain basic services. Once services were introduced, the neighbourhood became more populous (Fig. 17).

Because of the neighbourhood's 'formal' origins, most residents have legal titles to their land, although these were not fully regularised until 1996, when the land was formally granted by deed as the property of the State Government (Turpin, 2006: 21). The exceptions to the situation with tenure are several peripheral areas of invasion. There are at least three of these in the neighbourhood (see Fig. 18), including one on an area

Fig. 18. Houses in invaded area of Moctezuma.
Source: Melanie Lombard (2007).

earmarked for a community health centre, near the exit to Las Trancas (see Fig. 14). People first arrived here two years ago and constructed shelters of wood, cardboard, tin and plastic sheeting. This has caused conflict in the neighbourhood, as more established residents explained how they felt aggrieved about the expropriation of 'community' land by a group of settlers believed to be headed by a political leader.

3.4.3. Infrastructure and services

Despite most residents having legal tenure, the initial unserviced nature of the land has required them to undertake processes of self-organisation commonly associated with *colonias populares*. At the time of the research, the neighbourhood had most basic services, but the long process to obtain these was mostly driven by residents. The introduction of basic services took place over the course of about three years, from 1997 to 2000 (DGOP 2005), meaning the first residents were without formal services for between four and seven years. Electricity was installed by Federal Electricity Commission (CFE) in May 1997, and Teresa and Aida, a mother and daughter who had moved to the neighbourhood together and with the help of local organisation UCISV-Ver built separate houses, described how the cost of installation was included in residents' electricity bills (Teresa and Aida 16.02.07). Piped water was installed in December 1997, following residents' petitions to the Municipal Government through the neighbourhood *patronato*.[19] Throughout the prolonged petitioning process, residents applied extra pressure to the Municipal Government with demonstrations (Turpin, 2006: 22). By 2000, a sewerage network had been installed (DGOP, 2005: 14); however, it wasn't connected to the municipal system until 2002, again following pressure on the Municipal Government (Turpin, 2006: 23), and not all residents are connected.

Secondary services have taken longer to install in Moctezuma. The telephone service was installed in 2004, and by 2005 more than 60 per cent of homes had a phone (DGOP, 2005: 14). Most streets in the neighbourhood are unsurfaced, although many have pavements. At the time of the research, the Municipal Government had just started work to pave the main street, coinciding with campaigning for municipal elections (see Fig. 19). Many respondents expressed

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[19] A form of residents' committee which works with local government through the Office of Citizen Participation. For a fuller discussion of the Citizen Participation framework in Xalapa, see Lombard (2013a).

Fig. 19. Start of works to pave the main street, Moctezuma.
Source: Melanie Lombard (2007).

hopes that this would improve other services, particularly the existing bus service, which residents were petitioning to improve. Rubbish collection started in 1999, after residents' petitions as increasing numbers moved in to the neighbourhood. However, respondents expressed concern about rubbish dumping due to the irregular service.

At the time of the research, the neighbourhood had a doctor's service, only open during the day. Residents had submitted a petition for a health centre, which was seen as a priority (Turpin, 2006: 23), given health risks from open drainage channels (DGOP, 2005: 16–17). In 1993 a primary school was opened and in 2000/01, a kindergarten was formed, with another opened in 2005 (DGOP, 2005: 15). There is a sports area between Calle Citlali and Avenida Xolotl (DGOP, 2005: 20), and a football pitch. There are also several green areas and children's playgrounds, although not all are properly maintained according to residents (Teresa and Aida 16.02.07).

3.4.4. Social and economic aspects

Moctezuma's high levels of occupation may be related to the relatively rapid arrival of services. The predominant household structure is small families (between three and four members). The population is fairly young, with 49 per cent of women and 57 per cent of men aged under 23 (DGOP, 2005). Regarding occupation, women are most likely to be housewives (40 per cent), students (33 per cent) or employees (23 per cent) – mainly domestic or in shops – while men are mainly employees (54 per cent) and students (37 per cent) (DGOP, 2005: 28–29). According to research findings, many residents were self-employed vendors,

Fig. 20. Shop in Moctezuma.
Source: Melanie Lombard (2006).

selling home-made food or soft furnishings. Some households received contributions from other family members living outside the neighbourhood (seven per cent), of which 25 per cent were remittances (DGOP, 2005: 30), indicating some migration. Almost half the population (54 per cent) earned less than 2000 pesos monthly (DGOP, 2005: 31).

Diverse local businesses, including general stores (see Fig. 20), butchers', *tortillerías* and greengrocers, offer basic products (DGOP, 2005: 21–22). There is also a small weekly market selling fresh produce, set up by Gracia, a resident housewife and home worker (Gracia 14.02.07). However, high prices mean that many residents go outside the neighbourhood to do their shopping. There are also commercial services such as carpenters, electrical workshops, construction material suppliers and stylists, and there is a *cantina*[20] in Calle Xolotl (DGOP, 2005: 22). One resident, Olivia, had set up a small dress-making business (see Fig. 21) with microcredits obtained from the state (Olivia 05.02.07).

Moctezuma is testament to the complexity of *colonias populares*: the neighbourhood is atypical of

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[20] *Cantinas* are bars of ill-repute, which normally have almost exclusively male clientele.

Fig. 21. Olivia's workshop, Moctezuma.
Source: Melanie Lombard (2006).

many *colonias* in Xalapa in the sense that residents have had legal tenure from the start. Additionally, it appears quite consolidated, and it has generally higher incomes than other comparable neighbourhoods. But in many other respects it contains processes and features perceived as constituting *colonias populares* such as Loma Bonita: most of the dwellings are self-built or self-financed, living conditions are poorer than in middle-income areas, basic services are not universal, and residents had to organise to obtain existing infrastructure. Furthermore, the neighbourhood is viewed as a *colonia popular*, by its own residents and others. Certain aspects of the neighbourhood – such as the newly squatted areas, and its political origins – suggest an internal heterogeneity often not acknowledged in discourses about urban informal settlements. Once again, the complexity of relations and processes which occur within this neighbourhood, and those which connect it to the rest of the city, raise questions which do not seem to be addressed by standardised categories.

3.5. Conclusion

This chapter has explored the research setting of Mexico and Xalapa, in order to situate some of the issues discussed in previous chapters, and to explore local factors at national, municipal and neighbourhood scales. The urban context in Mexico is influenced by neoliberalisation, democratisation, and decentralisation processes, which have interacted with other historical, social and cultural factors – particularly uneven development, rapid urbanisation, inadequate formal housing and the *ejidal* land market – to produce a

situation in which *colonias populares* are the most common form of low-income housing. The legacies of a corporatist political culture have shaped how urban governments and spatial policies (such as regularisation) relate to *colonias populares*, in ways which seem to perpetuate their marginalised position, while simultaneously offering them prospects for improvement.

These processes, in conjunction with specific local factors, have affected the spatial and social development of Xalapa. Its role as capital of Veracruz, and the effects of economic reforms in the surrounding agricultural region, have led to large-scale growth and development of *colonias populares*, perceived as part of the city's 'crisis'. The examination of the two case study neighbourhoods in this setting revealed that *colonias populares* are far from uniform in their characteristics, both across neighbourhoods and internally, relating to tenure (which is not always illegal), origins (often driven by political factors), services (extremely varied), and socio-economic characteristics (similarly diverse). These issues indicate the complex and contradictory nature of *colonias populares* in Mexico, which is not always adequately captured by some of the more static characterisations of informality outlined earlier. As suggested previously, it may be through focusing on processes and relations rather than categories and typologies, that an increased understanding of the spatial and social construction of urban informal settlements can be reached. In the context of *colonias populares*, the spatial, social and cultural processes which contribute to place-making are relatively unexplored. The next two chapters employ this analytical lens to look at the discursive construction of urban informal settlements in Xalapa, and residents' constructive efforts in this context.

4. Making ordinary places: discursive constructions of *colonias populares* in Xalapa

Discourses play a key role in understanding urban informal settlements, and the discursive construction of urban informal settlements can be seen as part of the production of knowledge about these places. Examining the discursive element of place-making relating to these settlements therefore offers a better understanding of how knowledge about these places is produced, and may contribute to their marginalisation. This may be through ignorance or stereotyping, with tangible effects for residents and places, shaping the social and spatial fabric of urban informal settlements. 'Discursive' relates to sources (texts, images, conversations and so

on) that form part of, and reflect, local discourses: this includes individual perspectives, media reports, and official publications. Place-making's discursive element derives from its social character: as a social process through which space is constructed, it is a communicative process, as well as an individual mental one ([Burkner, 2006](#): 2). This relates to how people talk about, refer to, or imagine places; but also, to the potential effects these discourses have on the spatial, social, cultural and political construction of places.

Place-making as an analytical lens therefore offers the possibility of linking spatial to social construction, with a central element of this as discourse. Exploring the discursive construction of place highlights the precise relation between social and spatial marginalisation, by linking locality and spatial fabric to social constructions. Focusing on how the two case study neighbourhoods (and *colonias populares* more generally) are perceived in the city of Xalapa, the views of local government officials,[21] residents from other areas and members of civil society organisations are contrasted with those of *colonia* residents and other sources where relevant, to explore how different perspectives interact to discursively construct these neighbourhoods. The chapter is divided into three sections, based on themes drawn from the research findings about the discursive construction of *colonias populares* in Xalapa: dysfunctional urban development, othering, and disorderly cultures.

4.1. Dysfunctional urban development

One of the enduring representations of informal neighbourhoods seems to be that of dysfunctional urban development ([Ward, 1999; AlSayyad, 2004](#)). In local discourses about *colonias populares* in Xalapa, this idea was prominent, particularly relating to their perceived physical (and spatial) qualities. Relating to this general theme, this section explores some specific characterisations of these places, drawing on interviews and other

sources, namely: 'anarchic growth'; 'nothingness'; and 'unwanted responsibility'.

4.1.1. Anarchic growth

Uncontrolled urban growth was one of the key characteristics of *colonias populares* highlighted by local government respondents. It was explicitly mentioned by Joaquin, a senior official in the Municipal Office of Citizen Participation, as the reason behind Xalapa's public works deficit:

> *'There is disorderly growth, anarchic growth of the city, in such a way that colonias are emerging – some of them as illegal subdivisions, others as subdivisions which fulfil the requirements indicated by the Office of Urban Development and the State Government. ... In the illegally subdivided areas, it's a serious situation which is arising, because nowadays we have 150 illegal subdivisions, which means 550 hectares of land, which are subdivided without any authorisation, in a clandestine form'* (Joaquin 26.02.07).

This response contrasts orderly urban growth, where development complies with planning requirements, with 'anarchic' growth, through subdivision occurring on the margins of legality. It seems that *colonias populares* are motors of growth, but not the right kind of growth; generators of demand (for urban services), but demand which is unrealisable in its scale. This reinforces a view of these places as not 'officially' economically productive, and therefore 'irrelevant' in terms of the local, not to mention global, economy ([Robinson, 2006](#)).

The use of language here is particularly telling. The idea of 'anarchic' growth connotes chaotic places, in a physical but also social sense, seen in the use of terms like 'clandestine', recalling [Everett's (2001)](#) account of the discursive marginalisation of *barrios* in Bogotá. The implication is that these places are problematic because they contain disorder deriving, for example, from overcrowding. This notion was expressed by Bruno, a resident of central Xalapa who had previously lived in a *colonia popular*:

> *'I think there are more problems in a colonia popular because, let's say, there are more inhabitants, there are more people living in a small space'* (Bruno 24.05.07).

Thus links are made between the perceived physical disorder of these places, and their disorderly social character. Certainly, spatial marginalisation is often

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[21] These respondents were selected using snowballing techniques, based initially on informal conversations with local experts and settlement residents highlighting the significance of particular departments and specific officials. In total, 10 semi-structured interviews were carried out with local and regional officials, mainly at the level of directors, sub-directors and senior civil servants, in the Xalapa Municipal Offices of Public Works (1), Urban Development (3) and Citizen Participation (1); the Veracruz State Departments of Urban Planning (1), State Heritage (1) and Education (1); and the Federal Commission for Land Tenure Regularisation (2).

Fig. 22. The school in Loma Bonita, outside/inside.
Source: Melanie Lombard (2006), Azucena Jiménez (2007).

compounded by social isolation, particularly in the case of *colonias* developed on peripheral *ejidal* land, which are implicitly juxtaposed with regulated, 'formal' central areas. This suggests, again, that official frameworks find it difficult to account for things and places not easily quantifiable. This conceptual gap in official perspectives may underpin the idea of 'nothingness', also found in local discourses.

4.1.2. Nothingness

One strand in local discourses that characterises these settlements in terms of 'nothingness' relates to their perceived lack of urban facilities. This can be detected in the description of Loma Bonita by Gustavo, from the Municipal Office of Public Works:

> '*Over there in that zone there is absolutely nothing: you would need to construct starting from the adjacent colonias*' (Gustavo 22.02.07).

A similar characterisation was given by representatives from the Ejido Chiltoyac, the *ejido* which owns the land on which Loma Bonita is established. This negative framing calls to mind descriptions of 'slums' as 'dumping grounds' (Davis, 2006: 26). It also contrasts with what was observed in the neighbourhood during the research. As outlined above, there was an official primary school building, a football pitch, and a chapel, as well as a rudimentary water supply piped from a neighbouring settlement, which residents made weekly contributions for. This contrast between local perceptions and actual conditions in the neighbourhood is highlighted in Fig. 22, showing the school there. These 'nothing' places, supposedly anarchic by nature, are in fact productive and dynamic.

As suggested in Chapter Three, most *colonias populares* in Mexico are the result of illegal or semi-legal subdivision and sale of *ejidal* land. The idea of 'nothingness' as a spatial characteristic could be based on the nature of these transactions, 'non-existent' in legal terms (Azuela & Duhau, 1998: 159). Lack of official control may lead to perceptions of these places as an unwanted responsibility for local authorities.

4.1.3. Unwanted responsibility

Part of the 'problem' of *colonias populares* relates to local authorities' perceived inability to plan for growth and hence to provide services. This in turn is affected by the lack of revenue from service charges and taxes from these places, and a corresponding inability to exert social influence there, which may be taken as an indicator of 'anarchy'. Wanda, a civil servant from the Municipal Office of Urban Development, highlighted this when she compared the two case study neighbourhoods:

> '*In the whole of Loma Bonita nothing was planned, and it's an ejido which is soon going to be a problem for the Municipal Government because the people that bought there and are going to live there are going to need services, which are not the responsibility of the Municipal Government. But ... [the Municipal Government's] going to have to contribute [and] administer some type of resources for some infrastructure ... because of the need arising from irregular settlement, which an ejidatario didn't plan for. On the other hand, there's Moctezuma, which has regularised land tenure but has its difficulties, because the State also refrained from planning ... services which the Municipal Government must take into account*' (Wanda 21.02.07).

Whether the neighbourhood has legal titles, as in the case of Moctezuma, or not, as in the case of Loma Bonita, seems to make little difference to the Municipal Government. The salient point is the lack of 'planning' and hence control exercised by the local authorities. The comparison between the two neighbourhoods in this response shows that informality is not necessarily congruent with illegality (Fernandes & Varley, 1998; Roy, 2005). Moctezuma's 'regularised land tenure' is explicitly connected to the likelihood of service provision there; but with or without titles, a neighbourhood in need of services still represents a burden for the Municipal Government in its role as service provider.

Colonias populares, then, are perceived as evidence of 'dysfunctional' growth patterns in Xalapa, particularly relating to their physical characteristics, as shown in this section. This can be seen in the negative qualities that are discursively associated with these places: their spatial qualities of isolation and lack of planning are conflated with social aspects. Moreover, in the specific local context these descriptions say something about the relationship between *colonias populares* and the rest of the city, represented to a degree by the local authorities (but including other actors too). In terms of local authorities' inability to plan for growth, it is worth recalling Roy's (2005: 153) assertion that urban informality is the 'state of exception' produced by the sovereign state, which determines what is legitimate and what is not. In this sense, it is actually the state that constructs *colonias* as 'dysfunctional', through its categories of 'planned/unplanned', 'formal/informal' and so on. The 'dysfunctional' spatial attributes of *colonias* are compounded by their social marginalisation, explored in the next section.

4.2. Another world

In a casual conversation during research, a resident of central Xalapa remarked to me that *colonias populares* are 'another world', remote and different from the rest of the city. This seems to aptly express their social isolation within the city, as places (and people) which are 'other', perceived as not belonging to Xalapa. Three related issues arising from the research are explored in this section, namely: crime and insecurity; distance and discrimination; and 'ordinary places'.

4.2.1. Crime and insecurity

Non-residents of the case study neighbourhoods related the 'unknown' aspect of these places to perceived social characteristics of their residents, often expressed in negative terms. Macarena, a resident of a more central consolidated neighbourhood with informal origins, had heard of Loma Bonita through her church, which had collected charitable donations for the neighbourhood; she suggested that it was known for housing 'bad' people such as vandals and fraudsters. Similarly, a sample of reports from local newspapers revealed characterisations of *colonias populares* as places where the drugs trade is rife, and police presence minimal (Morales, 2007); where persistently poor living conditions exist (Rojas, 2007); where buyers of land are defrauded (Yonca González, 2007); and where the police raid garages in search of stolen vehicles (Salazar, 2007). This is not to undermine the veracity of any of these accounts; indeed, local newspaper reports tended to adopt a sympathetic attitude towards *colonia* residents. However, local media images may be influenced by depictions in the national news, which at the time, were reporting the demolition and eviction of '*barrios bravos*' (rough neighbourhoods) harbouring criminal activity in Mexico City (e.g. Marín, 2007; Martínez, 2007; Santos, 2007). Such depictions, at the level of national (general) and local (specific) discourses, may reflect and reinforce generalised perceptions of *colonias populares*.

In contrast to negative perceptions from outside the case study *colonias*, residents there were generally keen to point out that their neighbourhoods were peaceful ('*tranquilo*'), a word that occurred with frequency. Some compared their own neighbourhood favourably to surrounding settlements, highlighting the negative social characteristics of other *colonias populares*. In Loma Bonita, residents reported that it was quiet and safe, and some made a point of differentiating the neighbourhood from other places where gangs were rife (e.g. Isaac and Eliza 20.05.07). In Moctezuma, where security was seen as more problematic, perpetrators of crime were thought to be residents from neighbouring areas (e.g. Magdalena 14.02.07). Varley (2007: 20) suggests that residents may undertake 'othering' of people and places as a marker of identification with 'home' as private domain: not necessarily in an exclusive or hostile way, but as a place of temporary respite from interaction with others, in the context of crowded living conditions.

4.2.2. Distance and discrimination

The social characterisation of *colonia* residents as 'other' in local discourses may relate to the sense of discrimination that the residents themselves feel regarding their social position in Xalapa. The word '*olvidado*' (forgotten or neglected) was frequently used

Fig. 23. From Loma Bonita access road towards Xalapa city centre. *Source*: Melanie Lombard (2006).

by residents of Loma Bonita to describe how their *colonia* was viewed in the city. This often related to a sense of being remote or distant ('*alejado*'). A sense of this is captured in Fig. 23, which shows the Animas Tower, a landmark in central Xalapa, just visible from the road to Loma Bonita (see Fig. 5 in Chapter Three).

This highlights the relation between social and spatial marginalisation, explained by Sandra talking about Colonia Loma Bonita:

> '*Ah, the truth is, it's branded [tachada]! Because, for example, in the health centre in Colonia Lerdo de Tejada, they don't attend to you, because [they think that] this colonia [Loma Bonita] is really bad. You're very discriminated against, because they say that this colonia doesn't belong to Xalapa, that it's really far away, and who knows what else*' (Sandra 22.03.07).

This account emphasises the 'limbo status' that Loma Bonita finds itself in, between the Ejido Chiltoyac and the Municipality of Xalapa. While the neighbourhood is awaiting regularisation, the land is still legally part of the Ejido Chiltoyac. However, as far as the *ejido* is concerned, it is now the Municipality's responsibility; indeed, it is registered with certain municipal departments for residents' service petitions, and for welfare programmes (Natalia 01.05.07).

Because of this situation, it is quite plausible that residents of the *colonia* find themselves in a gap in terms of access to services, such as health care, which are not directly available in the neighbourhood. While the *ejidatarios* view the *colonia* as having made the transition to urban status, for the residents and the rest of the city there is still a sense of spatial and social isolation relating to its 'rural' character (discussed

further below). Such accounts also suggest a perceived difference between legally protected 'citizens' and marginalised urban dwellers (Chatterjee, 2004). The element of social stigmatisation of places and people relates to their normative categorisation as 'abnormal', rather than as 'ordinary'.

4.2.3. Ordinary places

The exceptionalism which locates urban informal settlements outside normal urban considerations may be related to ideas about the constraints which their residents suffer. Often, the priorities and aspirations of marginalised residents are perceived as determined solely by necessity, rather than incorporating aesthetic concerns or preferences: due to economic constraints, 'choice, creativity and aesthetical values are beyond the possibilities of local people' (Viviescas, 1989 in Hernández, 2008). Similarly, Walker (2001: 28) suggests that *colonia* residents are unable to express their 'true social identity' through the medium of their living environment, based on the architectural 'homogeneity' of these neighbourhoods. However, understanding *colonias* as 'ordinary places' means allowing their residents to have 'ordinary aspirations'.

The research found that *colonia* residents often perceive their neighbourhoods as offering opportunities for ownership, integration and social mobility. For example, Federico described how Moctezuma was initially considered

> '*of a popular nature, [but] recently it's changed a lot. It's not considered lower-middle class ... the economic status of the colonia has changed*' (Federico 15.02.07).

This suggests an upwardly mobile population, as families consolidate their dwellings, amid patterns of social change that are as complicated as anywhere else in the city. This aspect of social change also implies heterogeneity: as *colonias populares* are places of social mobility, they contain socio-economic diversity, suggested by the different house sizes observed in the case study neighbourhoods (see Fig. 24). Such socio-economic diversity belies the idea of a static, low-income social stratum as the sole source of inhabitants of *colonias populares*; and it complements the conception of urban complexity contained in these places (Simone, 2004).

This section has shown how *colonias populares* are discursively constructed as a separate urban sphere, where crime and delinquency exist in a setting of spatial and social isolation. However, 'othering' of these places

Fig. 24. Different housing in Moctezuma.
Source: Melanie Lombard (2007).

is undertaken by residents as well as 'outsiders'. The shifting social complexion of these neighbourhoods reveals that the social reality of *colonia populares* is as mundane and as extraordinary as in any other part of the city. Attempting to see these places as 'ordinary' does not mean glossing over the constraints and power inequalities which frame them (Robinson, 2002); but it suggests the potential to see their residents as citizens, as much as any other resident of Xalapa. Seeing them as places in process captures the view of residents and their aspirations; and it suggests reassessing marginalising characterisations of these places, for example as 'disorderly', to see these aspects as instead exemplifying the 'ordinariness' of these places.

4.3. Disorderly culture

As shown above, ideas about 'disorder' are frequently used to characterise *colonias populares* in Xalapa. During the research, respondents frequently made reference to a 'culture of disorder' in these places, and this section explores some of the ideas underpinning this notion, namely: autonomy; order and cleanliness; and rurality.

4.3.1. Autonomy

Some respondents made an explicit link between the semi-rural (or peri-urban) setting of *colonias* and their 'culture'. Wanda, from the Office of Urban Development, identified a specific tendency towards autonomy and disrespect for authority, deriving from *colonias'* origins as *ejidos*:

> *'In the ejidos they really need social education . . . If we don't educate our children to keep our property clean or to keep the street outside our house clean, then that culture is going to continue and it won't*

improve, the same as in the ejido. I mean if the first person who sold [the land], didn't have the decency to think "First of all I'm going to go to the Municipal Offices", but "I do what I want because I want to, and why should I have to go and ask somebody's permission?" – because in the ejido that's how it is, eh? "No, I'm autonomous, I don't have to go telling the Municipal Government that I'm going to subdivide". So it's a culture, but it's that of people who are part of the settlement' (Wanda 21.02.07).

Here, the respondent links the politically autonomous character of the *ejidos* with disregard for regulation shown by illegal subdivision. She draws a parallel between this situation and the perceived living conditions of *colonias* originating on *ejidal* land, implying a disrespectful 'culture' on the margins of urban society and legality. A link is made between how people live, in terms of disorder, and why they live like this, in terms of their disorderly 'culture', recalling deterministic 'culture of poverty' theories (e.g. Lewis, 1967).

'Autonomy' also relates to residents' perceived individualistic lack of concern for the collective good – whether embodied in a properly regulated urban area, or a clean street – recalling the idea of 'anarchy'. In this sense, autonomy is seen as a problem, in contrast to the heroic narratives of self-help (e.g. Turner, 1972) and entrepreneurialism (e.g. De Soto, 2000) outlined in Chapter Two. The notion of the collective good also implies normative judgements about what is acceptable, expressed in ideals such as order and cleanliness.

4.3.2. Order and cleanliness

Several respondents explicitly linked disorder and cleanliness, relating this to the need to keep individual properties and the streets clean, extending the need for

Fig. 25. Rubbish in Loma Bonita and Moctezuma.
Source: Azucena Jiménez (2007), Cristina Aguirre (2007).

cleanliness from private to public space (Wanda 21.02.07), as a norm of acceptable behaviour (Bruno 24.05.07). Cleanliness was also mentioned by Olga, long-term resident of Moctezuma:

> *'Twenty years ago when we arrived here, Xalapa was beautiful. It was the State capital, and it looked like it, it was clean. But now, so many people have arrived [and] there's no culture of rubbish [collection], of only putting it out when the lorry comes. No, they put it out there [on the street], and the guardians of the colonias . . . are the dogs'* (Olga 05.02.07).

This respondent makes an explicit link between cleanliness and overcrowding in *colonias populares*. The theme of disorderliness is revealed in the use of language such as 'chaos', and powerful animal imagery. On the other hand, this perception of disorder on the part of a resident of Moctezuma points to the lived reality of these places, relating to the unequal provision of services and facilities within the city (see Fig. 25).

The lived experience of these 'disorderly' places was also described by Olivia of Moctezuma, in terms of the difficulty of arriving at a job in the city centre with clean shoes:

> *'If it rains a lot, what I sometimes do, I used to get out my little cloth [when] I arrive there at the avenue. . . . You see we worked in an office [selling] my clothes, so . . . I'm not going to arrive with [muddy] shoes [laughs]. So I get out my little cloth, I clean myself up and let's go [laughs]'* (Olivia 05.02.07).

This response portrays issues about cleanliness from a different perspective: that of a resident who, from necessity, has developed innovative responses to problematic living conditions. Seeing this as a practical issue originating from a lack of services removes its moral overtones, and diminishes the

'cultural' dimension of disorder. Far from being the visible symptom of an anarchic culture, the issue of cleanliness represents another obstacle for residents to overcome in their daily lives, reflecting the frustrations of not having adequate infrastructure. Some respondents related this lack of infrastructure to settlements' perceived 'rural' nature.

4.3.3. Rurality

The idea of informal settlements as rural communities translocated to the city, where rural migrants who have failed to complete the 'rural-urban cycle' live (Abrams, 1964), has long been undermined (e.g. Mangin, 1967; Perlman, 1976). However, a perception of residents having a 'rural' cultural identity persists. For example, Neuwirth (2005: 11) describes a process of 'massive migration from rural regions to urban centres of the world . . . [a]nd always, once they got to the cities of their dreams, the migrants have become squatters'. This may relate to the development of informal settlements on formerly agricultural land. This 'rural' characterisation was discerned in local discourses in Xalapa: residents of the case study *colonias* mentioned how the label '*rancho*' (literally 'ranch', or 'farm') was used to describe their neighbourhood.

Sandra, from Loma Bonita, thought that views of the neighbourhood in the rest of the city tended towards this:

> *'They say that we're very, like, very modest[22] or, country bumpkins [arranchados]'* (Sandra 22.03.07).

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[22] The Spanish word used here, '*recatado*', connotes a sense of demure or reserved: in this context, it could also imply being introverted or 'backward'.

The wording here implies a link between the rural nature of these places and traditional ways of life. In the Mexican urban context, being seen as having rural customs implies a backward and even anti-modern outlook (Varley, 2008). Certainly, labelling a place or its residents as 'rural' within the context of the city may have pejorative connotations, as well as discursively separating the place and its people from 'the city'.

In fact, the supposedly homogenous 'rural' character of these neighbourhoods is undermined by their social and cultural diversity, reflected in their residents' varied places of origin. Both case study neighbourhoods are notable for the high number of residents who were born elsewhere,[23] and many respondents in Moctezuma remarked on this diversity as a positive aspect, such as Olga:

> 'As we come from many places, and bring different customs, what we've got here is not [people from] different neighbourhoods of Xalapa, it's [people from] different parts of the State [of Veracruz]. In the periphery generally we're from other parts of the State and from other parts of other states, because it's people who are not from Xalapa and they come to settle, no? . . . So the diversity of people that exists is very interesting' (Olga 05.02.07).

Diversity is seen as a feature of these places' identity; while the variety of residents' places of origin suggests they do not uniformly come from rural areas. A link is implied between the peripheral situation of *colonias* and the 'outsider' status of incoming residents; however, most informal settlement residents do not come directly from their place of origin, but have rented elsewhere in the city prior to settling and building. Although Xalapa's population increase in the 1980s and 1990s included rural-urban migrants, the years that incomers spend renting in central locations suggests that *colonias populares* conform with Mangin's (1967: 82) suggestion that settlements are 'urban phenomena resulting from sophisticated urban decisions made by long-time urban residents . . . following no rural pattern'.

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[23] Incoming migrants to Xalapa from 'rural' areas are often from small agricultural towns and villages in the State of Veracruz, which has a highly dispersed population spread across 10 medium-sized cities and hundreds of small settlements (Amezcua Cardiel, 1990). For example, settlers in Loma Bonita originated from Martínez de la Torre, a small municipality (population 97,968) north of Xalapa in the central zone of Veracruz State, while residents of Moctezuma came from Las Tuxtlas, a group of small towns in the southwest of the State. Others came from neighbouring states such as Puebla.

4.4. Conclusion

This chapter has explored the discursive dimension of place-making at the city level. Information gathered from the local context – mainly through interviews, but also from local media, official documents and observation – was examined for evidence of how *colonias populares* are portrayed and perceived as places in local discourses. In setting these perceptions alongside residents' lived experiences, it was shown that spatial and social dimensions are closely inter-linked. Often, *colonias* were described in negative terms. Spatially, they were seen as anarchic growth or 'nothing' places, resulting in an added burden of responsibility on local authorities. Similarly, the conflation of spatial qualities (such as greenery and distance from the city centre) with 'rural' culture meant *colonias* were perceived as backwards, 'disorderly' places, separate from the modern, 'urban' city. These portrayals of *colonias* in the local context were experienced by residents as discriminatory treatment and stigmatisation, for example regarding provision of basic and secondary services, indicating the potential for discursive place-making to contain political and marginalising tendencies, with tangible effects on the urban environment.

These discursive constructions of 'dysfunctional' and 'disorderly' places seem to be premised on normative views about 'real' neighbourhoods, based on dualistic framework of knowledge. The rhetorical opposition between these (existing) places and idealised conceptions relates to the construction of *colonias populares* in local discourses according to dualistic categories: for example, good/bad, rural/urban, clean/dirty, orderly/disorderly, planned/unplanned, citizen/settler. This discursive construction of *colonias populares* according to certain categories suggests the powerful effects of discourses. Yet the research showed that these constructions were not confined to 'official' or 'outsider' perspectives, but were also expressed by *colonia* residents in distinguishing their neighbourhood from 'other', dangerous settlements. This suggests the complexity of influences and relations in discursive place-making – beyond a two-way relationship between a repressive, monolithic 'state', and a passive, homogenous 'community' – encompassing a complicated network of power relations contextualised within the whole city. In fact, the 'ordinariness' of these places (seen in residents' aspirations and preferences, and these places' links with the wider city) shows that although they may be discursively isolated, they are part of the city in many ways. However, different perceptions can assign different meanings to places, and residents'

own place-making activities have the potential to resist certain discursive constructions and their marginalising effects. This raises questions about residents' self-directed activities in terms of place-making, and how this may constitute resistance to particular framings of urban informal settlements, which are explored in the next chapter.

5. A Place in the City: resident place-making in *colonias populares*

The constructed nature of place is based on the understanding that it is the product of diverse processes of decision-making over the course of many years (Goodman, 1972: 242). This may include the multiple and various activities which occur in and influence a place, and the values and meanings that they express, which are not inherent but are created and defended. While particular discursive constructions of place may entail marginalising effects through their reproduction of normative categories and meanings, people can also resist such effects by using places in certain ways (Cresswell, 2004). Residents' place-making activities can thus be seen as a form of resistance: not in opposition to a monolithic dominating power, but rather to ideas which circulate about these places. In particular, these activities express residents' agency, which is often obscured by negative portrayals in general and local discourses; and through the construction of place meaning, such activities resist the marginalising effects of certain discourses.

This chapter examines how residents are involved in place-making, which is defined as an everyday social process of making and remaking space (Burkner, 2006). The chapter focuses specifically on the individual and collective efforts of residents of the two case study neighbourhoods. *Colonias populares* usually demand a high degree of place-making by residents, who have to build dwellings and obtain services. It is through these activities that *colonia* residents resist discursive constructions which separate and divide them from the city: they are constructing their neighbourhoods as places in process of becoming part of the city. By exploring place-making in the two case study neighbourhoods, the chapter seeks to challenge understandings of urban informal settlements which portray them as disorderly, unclean, and illegitimate. It does this through a focus on spatial, social and cultural place-making activities (although such categories, used for heuristic purposes, overlap substantially in practice).

5.1. Spatial place-making

Using place-making as an analytical lens is based on an understanding of place as process, and in particular the idea of urban informal settlements as places in process. The dynamic nature of place can be located in its ongoing contribution to specific histories through the creation of a physical setting (Pred, 1984: 279). This suggests the importance of location, or physical place. This section explores resident place-making through land acquisition and building, activities which have an obvious physical or spatial element.

5.1.1. Acquiring the land

Land acquisition, a critical stage in the process of place-making in this setting, is often a prolonged and political process, sustained by residents' place imaginings. In both case study neighbourhoods, land acquisition processes were facilitated by political connections on the part of the groups who negotiated the sale on behalf of individuals. In Mexico, the most common form of land acquisition in *colonias populares* remains the 'legally invisible' sale of *ejidal* land to individuals, but intermediaries are extremely common, and this role is often played by self-defined community or political group leaders.

The practice of active political participation in exchange for land seems to be widely accepted within urban social movements in Xalapa. In Moctezuma, plots in Xalapa's Territorial Reserve were distributed by the State Government to different political groups involved in the urban social movement. A resident there, Gracia, described the process as follows:

> 'Some groups [of] people got together to request a little bit of land from a government office called State Heritage. ... It was for people that didn't have property, that didn't have houses, that were renting, and so that was how we started to request, to negotiate. ... They assigned us a plot, and then after they allocated it to us ... we paid for it in instalments' (Gracia 14.02.07).

The formation of Moctezuma coincided with the height of the Xalapa urban social movement's political activity, in particular that of the social organisation UCISV-Ver, whose organisational structure was based on regular meetings attended by militants but also housing petitioners, obliged to attend in exchange for land (Quiñonez Leon, 1997). In this way, group members' regular presence at protest marches or political meetings, in support of their organisation's political aims, was rewarded with land.

While the presence of organised groups may facilitate negotiations with the authorities, the land acquisition process fostered by such organisations could also be seen as clientelism. Offering land in exchange for political activity could be seen as another form of exploiting the needs of the poor for political ends, by political or 'civil society' organisations – the distinction being quite blurred in this context. However, many residents participate in such groups, not only at the stage of land acquisition, but on an ongoing basis. This may reflect their 'debt' to the groups, based on the exchange of land for political activity. Such groups contain an element of resistance to the established political order; and they may also form the basis for organising to obtain resources and services, as well as forging bonds between neighbours. Vicente of Moctezuma spoke of the 'emotional bonds' between residents that develop on the basis of living together through difficult conditions:

> 'We get along in unity: it's more or less like in the [rural] villages, there's more . . . coexistence. People know each other better, and for that reason you get stronger emotional bonds than when you live in your apartment and sometimes you don't know your neighbour' (Vicente 23.03.07).

This suggests that high levels of participation in establishing the *colonia* and obtaining services are both a social necessity and a contributing factor in building community (Ward, 1999: 181).

5.1.2. Building

After residents acquire a plot of land, they often need to clear and prepare it before they can start construction, which may begin with just a one-room shack, depending on housing need and economic resources. These factors, among others, determine how quickly construction progresses, and whether the household finances the construction (using building contractors, as seen in Fig. 26) or actually does the work themselves. Once the plot is theirs, many residents spend their free time visiting, clearing and levelling it, which is often necessary before construction begins. While this is clearly on the basis of economy and necessity, it also requires emotional investment, as well as investment of time and resources.

Several women described bringing their children to work on their plot, which often involved hard physical labour:

> 'Everything that's extra here we did it, including the [concrete] floor, we put it down between all of us, because we had the material, but we didn't have the money! [laughter] . . . I said, "Well we've paid for it

Fig. 26. UCISV-Ver contractor using basic construction techniques. *Source*: Melanie Lombard (2006).

> so this floor is going to work out, no? Well, what can we do, children, let's have a go eh?" Imagine, they were mixing gravel and [I said], "Grab the wheelbarrow and get in there with all that [building] material". And my children [said] "Oh, Mum!", and I said "Never mind, come on". We put down half [the floor] one day, and then the next day, we put down this side' (Olivia 05.02.07).

The involvement of children in the building process shows how necessity plays an important role in physical construction processes: all available family members are expected to take part. This perhaps also relates to the prevalence of female-headed households in *colonias populares*, who in the absence of adult male members of the household to do the work, and lacking the resources to pay contractors, must formulate alternative solutions. Symbolically, this collaboration is also important, as it indicates solidarity at the family level, through collective involvement in the construction of home (see Fig. 27).

The implication is that the process of attaining your own place is not easy or straightforward; but the imagined outcome is a source of motivation which sustains residents' efforts, particularly during difficult periods. Vicente, a long-term resident of Moctezuma who had bought a house in *obra negra* (i.e. unfinished)

Fig. 27. Family home in Loma Bonita.
Source: Melanie Lombard (2007).

Fig. 28. Chapel in Loma Bonita.
Source: Azucena Jiménez (2007).

from a family member, described the process of finishing the building work:

> *'It's quite tiring, but in the end pleasant, because you see the result of what you were imagining'* (Vicente 23.02.07).

In this case, the idea of dreaming as a form of resistance (Pile, 1997: 3) seems to capture the implicit trade-off between the unfavourable conditions which residents have to endure (for example, in expensive or poor quality rented accommodation) as the cost of obtaining a place of their own. This may also relate to the neighbourhood's hoped-for trajectory, from *ejidal* land to 'consolidated' *colonia popular.*

Physical place-making thus involves tangible processes of land acquisition and building, which are often imbued with political and emotional significance. Residents' homes are in continual process of improvement, and as Varley (2007) points out, are rarely regarded as finished. In these places, the spatial and physical speak of the history of the settlement and its residents, and also hint at its potential future. The narratives in this section are very different to portrayals of 'slums' discussed earlier; and residents' accounts of these processes, while acknowledging the constraints they operate within, emphasise their own agency. The creation of a physical place provides the setting for social relations, discussed in the next section.

5.2. Social place-making

The activities which contribute to the physical location described in the previous section create a locale, a site for activities. This section explores some of the social and cultural activities which take place in *colonias populares*, as a form of place-making: specifically, religious practices and schooling are discussed. These place-making activities inevitably contribute to place meaning, discussed in detail in the following section, but also touched on below.

5.2.1. Religious practices

Religion is an important social and cultural practice in *colonias populares*, as elsewhere in the city, at the household and neighbourhood scale. In Loma Bonita, the Catholic chapel was built and funded by the residents with some support from churches in neighbouring *colonias* (see Fig. 28). In this way, the chapel is a symbol of links with wider, external networks outside the neighbourhood. The small building on the main street is just big enough to hold two tables and a shelf with various icons, and provides seating space for around ten people. Its existence shows that residents prioritised creating a place for religious worship over other socio-spatial elements; the neighbourhood does not, for example, have a *cantina* (bar), unlike Moctezuma. A chapel was also one of the easiest facilities to set up, requiring little more than a plot, a rudimentary three-sided building and a blessing from the priest, which was arranged following the donation of the land by a local family, and the building of the structure by a group of residents. As well as expressing collective identity, the chapel is also an indicator of social and cultural relations with other neighbourhoods, making it part of the city, rather than a separate, isolated entity.

Fig. 29. Luz del Mundo chapel in Moctezuma.
Source: Melanie Lombard (2007).

Fig. 30. School in Moctezuma.
Source: Feliza Almazán (2007).

Religious expression in Moctezuma reveals resistance in another direction, to the dominance of the Catholic church. In the neighbourhood, the most prominent chapel belongs that of the religious denomination *Luz del Mundo* or Light of the World (see Fig. 29). This movement was founded in the 1920s in a *colonia popular* in Guadalajara, Mexico, where its flagship church and headquarters remain (Fortuny Loret de Mola, 1995). It has an established presence in *colonias populares* in Mexico, and its churches are notable in that they are usually financed and constructed almost entirely by local congregation members, in keeping with the self-build processes of these neighbourhoods. As an urban working class religion, it provides a point of identification for residents who may have retreated from the 'aggressive' Catholic church (Gledhill, 2006), which continues to be associated with the state as a traditional structure of authority. Thus in a largely Catholic country like Mexico, place-making practices may provide a symbolic focal point for residents to express identification with or resistance towards more established structures, as well as a focus for more orthodox religious activity. The presence of different denominations across the two neighbourhoods shows how they may relate to both traditional and newer

religious structures; ultimately, regardless of the type of structure, the connection itself is the important element. Such complex linkages with wider structures can be found in other areas such as schooling.

5.2.2. Schooling

Schooling, or education, is an extremely important activity which takes place in many neighbourhoods, including both case study *colonias* (see Fig. 30). As an important indicator of a neighbourhood's links with the rest of the city, ideas about education are often embodied in the local primary (or sometimes secondary) school. Schooling is a key social activity, especially given the demographic profile of the two neighbourhood, and residents emphasised the importance of good quality children's education being available in, or near to, their *colonia*. Residents may have participated in constructing the local school, as in Loma Bonita: however, the ensuing problems in this case highlight some of the wider issues relating to the significance of schooling in *colonias populares*, discussed here.

As mentioned above, the school building in Loma Bonita, used as a kindergarten at the time of the research, was constructed in 2000 as a primary school, by residents with support from the Municipal Government. It initially operated with two teachers from the rural community education service, the National Council for the Promotion of Education (CONAFE),[24] for several years, before growing class sizes prompted

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[24] CONAFE provides teachers at preschool and primary level for rural communities with between five and 30 children. Teachers are seen as community instructors who live in the community during the week, often in quite isolated areas.

Fig. 31. Primary school in Ignacio Zaragoza/school building in Loma Bonita.
Source: Melanie Lombard (2007), Braulia and Gervai Hernández (2007).

residents to apply for teachers from the urban education service, the Veracruz State Education Department (SEV).[25] However, at the same time, an application from the residents of adjacent neighbourhood Ignacio Zaragoza for a SEV-accredited primary school was submitted, and this was approved first.

As a result, only one salon in the Loma Bonita school building is now used, for CONAFE preschool education. The local primary school is operated by SEV in Ignacio Zaragoza, in an unfinished residential building (see Fig. 31). SEV rules that there must not be more than one primary school within a radius of 1000 metres, meaning that there cannot be one operating in Loma Bonita. This has created ill-feeling between the two neighbourhoods, as residents from Loma Bonita suspect those from Ignacio Zaragoza of bribing officials to undercut them (Camelia 16.03.07). They feel that the school which they built is only being half-used, in favour of an unsuitable building, with a poor teaching service from SEV (Alicia 26.03.07). Because of this, many residents do not send their children to this school, preferring to send them to the primary school in Colonia Sumidero, two kilometres down the road. Children arrive by bus, or walk if it is raining or there is no money for the bus fare, but the distance means their attendance is not always regular.

The construction of the school building (with the support of the Municipality) is clearly seen by the residents of Loma Bonita as one of their most important achievements. As a form of place-making, it involved the initiative and hard work of the residents, in collaboration with the authorities. Here, its particular significance is the creation of the neighbourhood as a locale, for education or schooling. In this sense, education is symbolic of links with the wider city, as well as of the neighbourhood's 'official' status. Being transferred from one educational system to another denotes a change in a neighbourhood's status, from rural to urban. The criteria for transferring from CONAFE to SEV is class size, meaning that it is an indicator of population growth: so by applying for a change in status, the neighbourhood is demonstrating its progress and prospects for future growth. However, in the situation described above, Loma Bonita was symbolically deprived of urban status; residents' sending children to school outside the local area could be a form of objection to this.

In this way, the issue of schooling also shows how place-making may be conflictual, as well as co-operative, in the context of *colonias populares*. Here, the conflict arose from rivalry between two sets of residents of adjacent neighbourhoods, who were in competition for the status of more developed neighbourhood, in order to obtain the accompanying benefits. Such points of conflict can create ongoing resentment between *colonia* residents, which may be misplaced but continues to simmer, fracturing communities who could potentially cooperate. However, this state of affairs may suit the authorities who can then deal with neighbourhoods separately rather than having to address problems at a larger scale. Such conflicts may also affect the particular identity of a place, and its meaning.

5.3. Cultural place-making

The idea of place meaning, or 'sense of place', rests on the characterisation of place as meaningful location, referring to people's attachment to place, in subjective

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[25] SEV offers primary school services to urban communities with 30 or more children, or on occasion fewer (from a minimum of 20), if there are many young children in preschool who are likely to enter primary soon.

Fig. 32. Different housing styles in central *colonia* and Loma Bonita.
Source: Melanie Lombard (2007).

and emotional terms (Cresswell, 2004: 7). This section explores the production of place meaning in *colonias populares* through residents' cultural place-making activities. Specifically, the discussion focuses on 'vernacular' architecture and place naming.

5.3.1. Vernacular architecture

The diverse forms of housing in *colonias populares* reflect the place-making processes that individual households undertake. Whether residents use contractors or do most of the work themselves, their dwellings reflect their own preferences to a certain degree, as the high level of resident participation in housebuilding means that the design of the house is to the owner's particular tastes. While other factors, particularly economic and legal, may act as constraints, there is a generalised preference for individually designed houses in Mexico.

The result of these preferences and constraints is that many urban informal settlements, where houses are almost wholly built or financed by residents, reflect a style of architecture which could be seen as having much in common with 'vernacular' architecture. How residents choose to build their homes may depend to a degree on the traditional architecture of the resident's place of origin, as Olga explained about her house in Moctezuma:

> 'We're from the south [of Veracruz], and in the south it's hot. . . . In San Andres, there's lots of vegetation, lots of plants, lots of water, and there are houses with a very high roof, and . . . a corridor, which here is the entrance hall: the space in front, where you put lots of plants. This was the idea that I had in my house. So I reproduced as far as I could the design of San Andres, the design of the south' (Olga 05.02.07).

Architecture adds to the character of these places, as *colonias populares* but also as unique neighbourhoods. This is contrary to observations that housing in *colonias* impedes residents' ability to express their social identity or aesthetic preferences. As Kellett (2002) suggests, the incremental building process, which can take many years, results in houses that are imbued with personal significance in terms of meaning and memory. Their physical form expresses ideas about progress and tradition, identity and memory, which may in turn express resistance to negative or stereotypical discursive constructions of *colonias populares*. Some examples of *colonia* housing can be seen in Fig. 32, showing the diversity of styles of 'home', affected by constraints but nonetheless ingenious.

5.3.2. Place naming

Place names express an important symbolic dimension of place meaning. While in formally planned places names are often imposed, in the context of urban informal settlements naming is part of place-making, and in particular the construction of place identity, which in turn relates to people's identification with a place. In this way, the action of place naming expresses collective memory based on shared everyday experience (Hebbert, 2005). Respondents suggested that places names might reflect the community leader who organised the settlement process, a public official who had helped residents, or even the *ejidatario* who sold the land (Mauricio Vegas 17.07.06). This is the case in Loma Bonita, where the main street was named after a local councillor who had assisted the community. Naming may also express resistance; in the squatter settlements of Brazil, streets are named after the solidarities of the people who built them, such as a man

who died in a police raid, the commemorative date of the settlements' legal recognition, or the settling of a neighbourhood row, as in *Rua de Acordo* (Agreement Street) (Nas, 1993 in Hebbert, 2005, 583).

The naming of the streets in Moctezuma after important characters form Aztec mythology could be seen as an expression of its unique place identity, but also its residents' resistance to standardised and imposed street names. This story was conveyed to me in slightly different versions by several residents of the neighbourhood. According to Olga, a community leader and founding resident of Moctezuma, she played an instrumental although purely serendipitous role in this, having happened upon a meeting of officials in the process of naming streets while she was visiting the neighbourhood prior to living there:

> '*When we first arrived, the streets didn't even have names. . . . I still wasn't living here, they were holding a meeting . . . they were going to name the streets: 'Virgin de Guadalupe', 'Valencia'. . . . I went in, because I was there that day . . . but they hadn't invited us, they hadn't even told us anything. So I say to them, "Hold on, it's fine by me if you gentlemen are going to name the streets however you want, but I'm going to propose something. I'm going to claim the rights of my Mexican ancestors, and my street, as there's no-one living there yet, and I'm the only one here from my street. I'm the representative of the street and I'm going to name it Quetzalcoatl, OK? So I suggest, gentlemen, that you please respect the rights of our Mexican ancestors, and leave aside things that have nothing to do with us, no?"'* (Olga 05.02.07).

The significance of this story is its assertion of residents' preference for indigenous street names – in contrast to the Hispanic names commonly used in the central areas the city, which normally derive from national heroes, Catholic religious figures, and commemorated dates – as a reflection of wider movements to reclaim the indigenous element of Mexican *mestizo*[26] culture. Although Olga's story expresses individual agency, she suggests she acted as a 'representative' reflecting the broader wishes of the settlers, something confirmed by other residents' recounting of this story. In

this way, place-making can be seen in terms of resisting established societal and cultural norms, through the reproduction of symbols of place which are meaningful to the community, as an alternative to the imposition of symbols considered significant by the authorities. These place-making activities which confer meaning on space could also be taken as symbols of resistance to the idea of dehumanised slums often depicted in discourses about informality. Instead, residents are engaged in humanising place, by inhabiting it, and through place-making activities of naming and signifying (Friedmann, 2007). *Colonias populares*, characterised by disorder and 'nothingness' in local discursive constructions, develop their own identities through residents' place-making activities.

5.4. Conclusion

Spatial, social and cultural place-making processes, which include everyday, small-scale activities, emphasise both the complexity and the 'ordinariness' of these neighbourhoods, as well as highlighting residents' constructive efforts, which often go unrecognised or undervalued. This chapter has explored elements of residents' place-making, focusing on physical, social and cultural place-making. In doing so, it has examined how residents construct location, locale and place meaning. While physical place-making activities such as acquiring land and building have a tangible outcome, they also express the dynamic nature of *colonias populares*, which are always in process of becoming part of the city. The complexity of local power relations may influence the process of land acquisition; but simultaneously, such processes can also express solidarity and resistance to negative discursive constructions of *colonias*, even when contextualised by hard work and suffering.

Meanwhile, social place-making activities such as religious worship and schooling, which take place in these neighbourhoods as in others all over the city, show how 'ordinary' they are, as well as providing important links to wider social structures. This is not to suggest that place-making is always straightforward or even peaceful; conflict can occur relating to residents' constructive activities, and this may affect progress. However, residents' tenacity and inventiveness is also expressed through place-making, particularly in cultural activities such as architecture and place naming which suggest their neighourhood's significance as a specific place in the context of the wider city, but one that is defined on the terms of its residents rather than on the basis of static categories such as 'informal', 'rural'

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[26] The term *mestizo* generally refers to the mixed race identity of 55 per cent of Mexicans (Heritage, 2004). However, *mestizaje* has been described as a national assimilationist model in the context of Mexico's 'democratic transition' (Gledhill, 2006), a tool in the service of nation-building which has obscured elements of indigenous identity.

or 'illegal'. In this way, applying a place-making lens to urban informal settlements links the social and spatial dimensions of marginalised urban places. Emphasising residents' stories of place means reimagining urban informal settlements as 'ordinary places', as complex, diverse and creative as any other place in the city (Lombard, 2009), while simultaneously revealing the limits of our understanding.

6. Conclusion: the potential of place-making

The aim of this paper was to explore how the discursive, spatial, social, cultural and political construction of place occurs in *colonias populares* in Mexico, and how this illustrates limited understandings about urban informal settlements, in order to unsettle some assumptions underlying marginalising discourses. This focus was guided by ideas about 'place' from critical social geography, synthesised in 'place-making', the analytical lens used to view diverse factors influencing the development of urban informal settlements. It sought to do this through exploring complexity in situated cases of particular neighbourhoods with 'informal' characteristics, looking at their residents' lived experiences, and comparing these with information from other sources such as local policy, media, public opinion and interviews with local government and civil society representatives. In doing so, it contrasted discursive constructions of *colonias populares* with the lived experiences of their residents, which may be shaped by, but are not limited to, the effects of these constructions.

In response to limited and quantified understandings of informal neighbourhoods, the paper has argued for different ways of thinking about informal settlements, which emphasise their fluid, dynamic nature, constituted by social processes rather than static categorisations. This relates to the continued gaps in urban theory, revealing the limits of knowledge about these places, but also the dominance of certain frameworks and circuits of knowledge production. This in turn can lead to ignorance of particular places and processes, or their stereotyping, with material, often negative effects for residents. As an analytical lens, place-making emphasises 'place' as the site of lived experience, dynamic change and power. By foregrounding the spatial element of urban informal settlements, it supports understanding socio-spatial processes of construction, as well as how social and spatial processes are related. As the aggregate of many decisions over time, places are sites of creative social interaction which constructs them as meaningful. Processes which occur in and

around a particular place, including residents' everyday activities, are fundamental to its constitution. But place-making can also include discursive constructions of place through local policy, media, and public opinion, as well as wider influences at national and international scale.

Specifically, the paper sought to contribute to debates around the 'ordinary' nature of urban places, which suggest moving beyond standardised categories of urban phenomena, and to debates around ethnographic approaches to urban poverty and informality, which emphasise agency in the context of marginalised places. Introducing an explicitly spatial dimension to these debates suggests a broader understanding of urban informal settlements, and a move towards the theorisation of the relationship between social processes and spatial outcomes. The theoretical potential of place-making as an analytical lens is thus twofold, discussed briefly in the following paragraphs.

6.1. The production of knowledge and ordinary places

Firstly, in support of understanding how knowledge is produced about specific places and generalised categories, place-making allows a detailed exploration of discursive constructions of both specific and general phenomena. The research found that the neighbourhoods investigated were seen by 'outsiders' of the neighbourhoods as the epitome of the city's 'dysfunctional' urban growth. These local discursive constructions reflect and reproduce narratives from wider academic and policy discourses. Discourses may have material effects: for example, portraying *colonias* as 'another world', distant and different from the rest of the city, affects their residents through stigmatisation and discrimination by officials, public sector workers, and other citizens, which in turn can negatively affect service provision and attendance to other needs. However, 'othering' of nearby neighbourhoods by residents of the two case study *colonias* also suggests the power of discourses to influence how ordinary urban residents think and feel about themselves and other urban dwellers, as well as influencing local policy interventions.

In response, place-making enables a renewed understanding of urban informal settlements as 'ordinary', in the sense that they have the capacity to be as creative, diverse and distinctive as anywhere else in the city. Place-making offers a different perspective on urban informal settlements, capturing the idea of 'place as process', which is fundamental to incremental

informal development but is often hidden by static or quantitative characterisations classifying a place as 'poor', 'illegal', etc. This is at odds with the way residents of these neighbourhoods talked about them: their responses suggested an aspirational and forward-looking view of their *colonias* as places in process. Seeing 'place' from a critical social geographic perspective means focusing on the power to determine place meaning – and hence who places are for, and what can be done in place – opening up the possibility of subversion of these expectations. In this way, the paper contributes to debates suggesting that a postcolonial urban studies should seek to explore the ordinariness of places across the city, rather than fixating on particular categories or hierarchies.

6.2. Gaps in urban theory and urban dwellers' agency

Secondly, the use of a place-making analysis reveals gaps in urban theory which derive from the privileging of particular forms of knowledge production. It enables moving beyond the exclusive and normative categories often entailed in planning debates, to re-emphasise the implicit spatial dimension of marginalised places. As well as failing to account for activities at different scales (household, neighbourhood, city), these categories often gloss over everyday activities in neighbourhoods, which may seem inconsequential but play an important part in the construction of place meaning. Looking at how residents' place-making activities construct *colonias populares*, the research found that these activities contribute to location (physical place) and locale (material setting for social activities), but also to meaningful place. Moreover, these activities could be seen as a form of resistance to the effects of discursive constructions of place, and an assertion of residents' agency.

Place-making thus offers a different way of conceptualising the productive (in the social and cultural, rather than economic, sense) activities of residents in urban informal settlements, which are often ignored, devalued or misrepresented in academic and policy discourses. It emphasises the productive effort of residents not just in physical terms of housing or services, but also in the social, cultural and political construction of a place, in the wider context of the city. The analytical lens of place-making therefore emphasises residents' efforts and allows a rethinking of what these particular places in the city mean to the people who live in them. The phenomenological element in this analysis prioritises the socio-spatial dimension of place

through lived experience, emphasising residents' stories. Urban informal settlements are still dehumanised by quantitative or economic representations which obscure the materialities of life there. Instead, a place-making approach views these neighbourhoods as rich, complex places in the city, contributing to ethnographic work on marginalised places which emphasise the agency of actors and the importance of local factors in determining outcomes.

This is not to deny the context of these activities, which are often constrained by legal and economic factors, at the neighbourhood and city level – which in themselves may be considered a form of place-making. Maintaining an awareness of power relations with regard to place might mean recognising that people do not necessarily want to construct their places in terms of obtaining services and infrastructure; but they are forced to, often in unfavourable circumstances, meaning they pay more than middle income residents. On the other hand, cultural factors in the context of Mexico indicate that certain processes such as land acquisition and self-build housing are common in Mexico among all social classes, and that the degree of choice offered by these processes is preferred by many urban residents.

6.3. Future research directions

The prevailing dominance of particular forms of (formal, official) knowledge, and the assumptions that underlie these, suggest there is still much work to be done in this area. Issues that were briefly touched upon in the above discussion and would benefit from further investigation include how quickly regularised neighbourhoods lose their marginalised status, and what factors are involved in this; and how relations between different tiers of government (local, regional and national) may affect the prospects of particular neighbourhoods. Similarly, more explicit investigation of residents' understandings of place-making activities, and how this relates to understandings held by local authorities, would enhance this field. What is clear is that critical issues relating to the marginalisation of 'informal' areas in the urban context are as relevant as they have ever been, if not more so. Ongoing informal urban development in Mexican and Latin American cities indicates a pressing need to better understand how and why these places are created and function; while the increasing prevalence of massive low-income housing developments in Mexico suggests comparative research between formal and informal low-income areas would be valuable. Meanwhile, in the context of global financial crisis, manifestations of urban informality can

be detected in cities of the global North, including the United States (e.g. Burkeman, 2009).

'Informality' is not going away, then, and some terminology is needed to discuss the issues around it, including to critically reflect on how they are discussed. Given the centrality of the concept of 'informality' to debates in the urban context of the global South, this paper does not argue for the term's rejection or replacement. This is not to suggest that language is not important – debates about the 'return of the slum' in development discourse underline its centrality – but rather, that a focus is maintained on the wider issues at stake, which are how ideas and terms are used, in a more or less critical way.

Place-making allows a broader understanding of these issues by highlighting the discursive construction of place meaning, opening the way for different understandings of the same place. As Massey (1991) points out, there is never one single sense of place even within the same neighbourhood, given the multiple viewpoints of the actors involved. This seems to suggest that different actors involved in place-making in the same location may effectively be making different places: the place that is being made is conceptualised differently by the people involved in place-making. It also implies that among residents there may be different 'senses of place', just as among agents of the state there may also be variation: however, the research also suggested some sense of collective endeavour involved in residents' efforts to achieve a common goal (for example service provision), expressed through their readiness to collaborate as individuals and households.

This paper's concluding suggestion, then, is for an appreciation and awareness of the dynamic tensions contained within ideas about 'informality' (a place can be *both* informal *and* creative, productive and so on), suggesting rethinking the normative inference which often underlies these categories. In particular, it argues for the need to retain a sense of the complexity of urban informal settlements, while suggesting that they can and should be better understood in the urban context where they develop. Ultimately, this paper has tried to make a case for a more nuanced debate around the issue of urban informal settlements. A focus on place-making has revealed that often, place meanings are understood so differently as to lead to the imagining and creation of different places in the same location. This finding may aid understanding of the often conflicting and contradictory interpretations of these neighbourhoods in the city where they develop. A more critical understanding of theories of urban informal settlements might better account for this, through giving increasing prominence

to the residents' stories. Furthermore, in order to counter the marginalising effects of discourses, these stories need to be continually returned to. This is not to take a romanticised view of residents' lived experiences; but it is to argue for their (re)insertion into discourses at all levels, whether academic, policy or local, and thus into the idea of the city. It is also to argue for maintaining an awareness of the complexity of these places, which are neither simply good nor simply bad, urban nor rural, formal nor informal, but 'ordinary' neighbourhoods in marginalised circumstances.

Acknowledgements

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