



A Typology of Informal Housing in the United States: Lessons for Planners

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Claire W. Herbert¹ , Noah J. Durst²,
and Deyanira Nevárez Martínez²

Abstract

Recent research has documented the prevalence of informal housing across urban and suburban contexts in the United States. While there have been some efforts to theorize across cases, there has been little to no work to connect theory to on-the-ground occurrences to offer clear lessons for planners. This article begins to fill this gap. Analyzing across existing research, we create a typology of informal housing in the United States: infill, subdivision, repurposing of private property, and occupation of public space. Then, we identify five common features that drive their production, use, and conditions. Finally, we offer important takeaways for planners and practitioners.

Keywords

informality, housing, planning theory, land use

Abstract

Investigaciones recientes han documentado la prevalencia de viviendas informales en contextos urbanos y suburbanos en los EE. UU. Aunque hay algunos esfuerzos para teorizar a través de los casos, ha habido poco o ningún trabajo para conectar la teoría con los hechos sobre el terreno a fin de ofrecer lecciones claras para los planificadores. Este artículo contribuye para llenar este vacío. Al analizar la investigación existente, creamos una tipología de vivienda informal en los EE. UU.: relleno, subdivisión, reutilización de propiedad privada y ocupación de espacio público. Luego identificamos cinco características comunes que impulsan su producción, uso y condiciones. Finalmente, ofrecemos información importante para planificadores y profesionales.

Keywords

Informalidad, Vivienda, Teoría de la Planificación, Uso del Suelo

摘要

最近的研究记录了美国城市和郊区非正规住房的普遍性。尽管前人已经做出了一些跨案例理论化的努力，但几乎没有工作将理论与实际事件联系起来，以便为规划者提供明确的经验教训。本文开始填补这一空白。通过对现有研究的分析，我们在美国创建了一种非正规住房类型：填充、细分、私有财产的再利用和公共空间的占用。然后，我们确定了推动其生产、使用和条件的五个共同特征。最后，我们为规划者和从业者提供了重要的启示。

关键词

非正规, 住房, 规划理论, 土地利用

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¹University of Oregon, Eugene, OR, USA

²Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI, USA

Corresponding Author:

Claire Herbert, University of Oregon, 1291 Kincaid St, PLC #729,
Eugene, OR 97403, USA.

Email: cherbert@uoregon.edu

Introduction

Informal housing in the Global South is widely studied. For almost five decades, scholars have broadly theorized the factors that contribute to the proliferation of informal housing conditions and have documented a wide variety of housing practices that exist partially or largely outside the reach of the state (see Roy and AlSayyad 2004). Only over the last two decades have planning scholars acknowledged the existence of urban informality—and informal housing in particular—in the United States and begun to think through its implications for planning education, scholarship, and practice in this country. For example, in recent research in this journal, Mukhija and Loukaitou-Sideris (2015) advocate incorporating content on urban informality in the Global North into U.S. planning curricula as a means of training students to navigate the difficulties posed by informality. Planning scholars have also explored new methods for measuring the prevalence of informal housing (Durst 2016; Wegmann and Mawhorter 2017), and examined potential impacts of the regulatory environment on the production of and demand for informal housing (Brown et al. 2020; Heikkila and Harten 2019). Scholars have successfully argued for the importance of urban informality for the planning profession (Harris 2018; Roy 2005).

Scholarship on informal housing in the United States has expanded significantly in recent years. Much of this research has focused on informal housing production on the U.S.–Mexico border (Larson 2002; Ward 1999), but more recently has examined informal housing in high-cost cities like Los Angeles (Mukhija 2014; Wegmann 2014), distressed cities (Fairbanks 2014; Herbert 2021), and even rural areas (Mukhija and Mason 2015). This burgeoning literature has dispelled the myth that urban informality is restricted to the Global South, and has documented a variety of informal housing practices across highly varied U.S. housing markets and spatial contexts. Much of this scholarship focuses on particular cases of informal housing in specific contexts, and thus has limited implications for planning education and practice more generally. Other scholarship theorizes more abstractly about a variety of manifestations of informal housing, but in somewhat of a scattershot manner, with examples spanning the breadth and depth of different contexts (Durst and Wegmann 2017; Harris 2018). Without more systematic theorizing to identify conceptual connections, continuities, and contingencies across the variety of informal housing documented in the United States, this scholarly breadth risks fragmenting into atomistic studies loosely framed under one topical umbrella but without a coherent sense of the different types, their primary causes, and their consequences.

In this paper, we balance these two approaches by comparing across cases and contexts to create a typology of informal housing in existing U.S. research and articulating the common features that drive their production, use, and conditions. In doing so, we provide insight into patterns

across cases, thus allowing for broader theorizing, while also illustrating the direct relevance of informal housing for on-the-ground planning by situating that theorizing in specific contexts throughout the United States where one or more manifestations of informal housing is common. We first introduce and define four types of informal housing: informal infill, informal subdivision, informal repurposing of private property, and informal occupation of public space. After looking at these four types in detail, we then identify five unifying characteristics of informal housing in the United States: (1) it arises in contexts wherein the formal housing market is out of sync with demand; (2) its form responds to features of the local sociospatial environment; (3) its producers and users are motivated by elements of both necessity and preference; (4) its conditions are associated with increased legal, financial, health, and safety risks in comparison with formal housing; and (5) beyond the enforcement (or not) of regulations, the state is broadly implicated in its production, use, and conditions through benign neglect. By advancing conceptual understanding of informal housing in the United States, this article promotes cross-context comparison, delimits important questions for new research, and offers lessons for planners and policymakers who risk exacerbating the negative consequences of informal housing by failing to recognize the presence and rationality of different types.

Theoretical Developments: Informality from South to North

Definitions of informality commonly draw from scholars originally analyzing economic practices in the Global South that are “unregulated by the institutions of society, in a legal and social environment in which similar activities are regulated” (Castells and Portes 1989, 12) or that “fail to adhere to the established institutional rules or are denied their protection” (Feige 1990, 990). Both definitions capture practices that defy regulations and those that do not benefit from regulatory protection by the state. Castells and Portes (1989) also disentangle the normativity of *informal* practices from the *illicit* nature of criminal activity. They explain that informal practices may use illegal *means* but do so to achieve broadly conceived socially legitimate *outcomes*. The production and use of housing is a socially licit pursuit, even if the means violate regulations or operate outside their purview or without their protection. More recently, Roy (2005) argues that in the Global South, informality is so ubiquitous that it drives the material production of urban space: planning, formalization, and regulation often follow.

Comparative scholarship from the Global South illustrates the influence of local culture and conditions for both the mode of informal housing and how authorities respond (Ren 2018; Roy and AlSayyad 2004). While demonstrating that much can be learned from cross-national comparison,

this research also reaffirms the significance of attending to local conditions. The U.S. situation is distinctive from the Global South where regulations are routinely ignored or absent, but also from other Global North contexts in ways that warrant specific attention. In particular, the federalist structure of the United States leads to decentralized governance and decision-making regarding land use and housing laws which may promote the varied types of informal housing we analyze here. At the same time, private property ownership is a deeply held cultural value leading to high levels of regulation but also the widespread ideal that individuals are free to do what they wish with their property (e.g., Herbert and Orne 2021). In contrast, in many other Global North places like parts of Western Europe, government is expected to play a more central role in the provision of housing which influences the prevalence of urban squatting movements (Martínez 2020). We focus on the United States wherein informal housing manifests across common regulatory regimes (Durst and Wegmann 2017) and responds to national housing markets and planning practices. By focusing on U.S. informal housing in this analysis, we scaffold future cross-national comparison.

Durst and Wegmann (2017) advance conceptual understanding of the way that informal housing in the United States operates in relation to the state: it manifests as non-compliance by property owners/users with existing regulations, a lack of enforcement of particular regulations by local governments, and via the deregulation of entire segments of the housing market. They also demarcate the range of regulatory regimes across which informal housing in the United States functions: property ownership and transfer, subdivision regulation, zoning and land use, and building codes. They conclude with three key findings about informal housing in the United States: it is typically hidden from view, geographically varied, and interwoven with formal aspects of the housing market. Aiming to advance cross-national comparison, Harris (2018) creates a broad schematic about the scale, coordination, and visibility of urban informality, conceptualizing different modes that arise when a threshold has been passed. Both articles point toward the significance of localized conditions, geography, and visibility, but there is still considerable nuance here to unpack.

Some recent scholarship in the Global North mirrors more closely phenomena termed “informal” in Global South research, like squatting or encampments. Other work using the informality lens, however, studies a wide swath of housing-centered practices ranging from room-sharing (Nasreen and Ruming 2021) to financing (Jang-Trettien 2021) to housing searches (Usman, Maslova, and Burgess 2021), leading to a conceptual messiness regarding what counts as informal regarding housing in Global North contexts. Relatedly, other scholars have argued that special attention must be paid to the dynamics of economic inequality in the Global North that shape actors’ motivations and the material conditions of informal practices to move beyond the uncritical conflation

of “DIY” with “legitimate” urban informality (Devlin 2018; Herbert 2021). In short, a lot of work remains to be done to demarcate the boundaries of informality in Global North contexts like the United States. If informal housing in the United States manifests in such varied ways, how do local sociospatial and housing market conditions influence the types and conditions of informal housing across different urban and suburban contexts? And how can planning practitioners concretize lessons from informality scholarship to address local manifestations of informal housing?

To promote analytical clarity, we scaffold common definitions (Castells and Portes 1989; Feige 1990) and focus on the informal development of housing (Roy 2005) that transgresses or is denied the protection of the regulatory regimes Durst and Wegmann (2017) identified. By integrating the role of the state and the production of the urban environment, this conceptualization helps to fill in theoretical gaps about how informal dynamics respond to and shape varied socio-spatial/geographic contexts and the visibility/hiddenness of informality (Durst and Wegmann 2017; Harris 2018) and concretizes these lessons for practitioners. While Roy (2005) argues that informality is the dominant mode of urban development in the Global South, our typology highlights four distinct types of housing that are often produced through informal development processes in the United States and the factors that lead to their production, use, and conditions, such as the way these informal housing types are embedded in and shaped by local housing market conditions and geographic contexts.

Four Types of Informal Housing in U.S. Research

This section introduces a typology of informal housing in existing U.S. research. Typologies are often used in social science research to make sense of complex, newly discovered phenomena (Snow and Anderson 1993). By examining the diverse ways in which housing is informally developed in the United States and probing their differences and similarities, our analysis provides insight into the factors that drive the production, use, and conditions of four distinct types of informal housing, and provides a common analytical framework for examining the causes of housing crises and their manifestations vis-à-vis the state. Informal infill refers to the unpermitted creation of additional dwelling units on lots or in buildings, by constructing new units, converting nonresidential space, or splitting residential units. Informal subdivision refers to the creation of mostly unplanned suburbs on greenfield sites, developed largely without public or private oversight over land and housing development, financing, and property transfer. Informal repurposing of private property entails the reuse and repurposing of vacant and abandoned housing/buildings in ways that circumvent legal title and formal ownership of the property itself. Finally, informal occupation of public space refers to the occupation of publicly

owned (or at least publicly used) space for shelter, primarily in the form of homeless tent encampments but also including car or RV-living (which may be more dispersed or incorporated into encampments).

Informal Infill

In major metropolitan areas, large numbers of new housing units—many of them renter-occupied—have been developed outside formal permitting processes and often fail to comply with building codes. In places like New York with higher density, these units are often produced by illegally subdividing existing buildings, including unpermitted basement renovations (Neuwirth 2008). In areas such as Los Angeles, where the landscape is dominated by single-family housing, unpermitted additions to dwellings, construction of new units, and conversion of nonresidential structures (like garages) are common (Mukhija 2014; Wegmann 2014; Wegmann and Mawhorter 2017). Informal infill units are noncompliant and nonenforced with regard to existing regulations (Durst and Wegmann 2017).

Evidence to date suggests that informal infill is most common in housing-constrained metropolitan areas. Geographic constraints, such as mountainous terrain or proximity to water, in many of the largest cities in the country limit the amount of land available for development and lead to inelastic housing supply (Saiz 2010). Such land-constrained areas are also more likely to adopt strict land use regulations, particularly if they have experienced rapid growth in prior decades (Saiz 2010). Wegmann and Mawhorter (2017) examine the extent of unpermitted construction across multiple cities in California between 1990 and 2010, finding that unpermitted units were produced across urban and rural contexts and high- and low-density cities. However, unpermitted units made up a particularly high share of new housing in high-density cities, especially in coastal areas or surrounding major metropolitan areas such as Los Angeles and San Francisco, where housing supply is most constrained (Wegmann and Mawhorter 2017). In New York City, an estimated 114,000 unpermitted units were developed between 1990 and 2000 alone. In immigrant enclaves in outer boroughs, informal infill represented nearly 40 percent of new housing stock between 1990 and 2005 (Neuwirth 2008). More recently, research examined the prevalence of unpermitted single-family housing units across the ten largest metropolitan areas (Brown et al. 2020). Notably, those with the highest rates (Los Angeles, 66% of new units; New York, 58%; Boston, 58%; and Philadelphia, 52%) are constrained by geography and have stricter-than-average land use regulation (Brown et al. 2020). In constrained housing markets like Los Angeles, aggressive and comprehensive code enforcement is often impossible due to limited municipal budgets (Wegmann and Bell 2016). This lack of reliable regulatory enforcement by the state in a highly regulated context creates conditions wherein unpermitted/noncompliant housing

proliferates with few negative repercussions for property owners. In contrast, the three metropolitan areas studied by Brown et al. (2020) with the lowest rates of unpermitted development (Dallas, 24%; Atlanta, 19%; Houston, 10%) were unconstrained by geography and had a regulatory environment that was at or below the national average. Similarly, Conrad, Mawhorter, and Wegmann (2021, 3) found very little evidence of informal infill in Austin, Texas: a “more representative US metropolis . . . given its inland location and relative lack of topographic and regulatory constraints on outward urban expansion.” That is, in expansive, interior cities like Austin, market pressures are more likely to push affordable housing outward rather than manifest as informal infill.

In many cities experiencing constrained urban growth, the lack of supply in the formal market and high cost of housing precludes active participation by many low- and even middle-income residents. Thus, demand for informal infill units is driven largely by matters of necessity, providing rental housing that is generally less expensive than formal units or rental income that enables buying in a high-cost market. However, many informal units pose significant health and safety risks for residents due to noncompliance with existing building codes (Mukhija 2014; Neuwirth 2008; Wegmann 2014). In August 2021, at least eleven people died in New York City when their unpermitted, noncompliant basement apartments rapidly flooded and no proper emergency exits existed (Zaveri et al. 2021).

At the same time, the development of informal infill also serves to accommodate changing preferences for housing, particularly for urban residents who prioritize proximity to amenities or transit, smaller and less traditional living quarters, and the opportunity to live near extended family (Chapple et al. 2011; Landis and Reina 2019; Wegmann 2014). Thus, even where residents may be able to afford formal housing, the informal market may provide housing options with greater use values than those they could access in the formal market. The informal market also provides clear benefits for owners of rental property such as an additional stream of income and housing for kin (Chapple et al. 2011).

Informal Subdivisions

A very different manifestation of informal housing arises in contexts where housing production is not constrained by either geography or regulation and where sprawl is therefore commonplace. Typical suburban housing in the United States involves the development of land and housing in tandem, in a highly regulated, complex, coordinated process involving a number of stakeholders and oversight processes (Durst 2019). Informal subdivisions are created when developers subdivide and sell land with minimal improvements, often using land contracts and/or seller-financing. The buyer is then tasked with overseeing construction and/or building

their house or purchasing a manufactured home. Informal subdivisions are unregulated (Durst and Wegmann 2017); they are denied the protection of regulations that typically govern subdivision development in the United States (Castells and Portes 1989; Feige 1990).

Although most in-depth research on this topic has focused on *colonias* along the U.S.-Mexico border (Esparza and Donelson 2008; Larson 2002; Mukhija and Monkkonen 2006; Ward 1999), research shows that similar informal subdivisions are scattered across the urban fringe in non-border states including in the Appalachian Mountains, South Carolina, and Georgia (Durst 2019; Ward and Peters 2007). Durst and Sullivan (2019) estimate that there are, at minimum, 2.1 million housing units located in informal subdivisions in the United States. Research suggests that informal subdivisions are largely a phenomenon across regions characterized by “unplanned growth”: residential development of both land and housing that occurs outside the standard regulatory environment that governs land use and housing production in most of the United States. Urban areas such as what Pendall et al. (2006) call “Wild, Wild, Texas” are emblematic of unplanned growth as it is practiced today. Counties in that state retain little regulatory authority beyond subdivision regulations, which primarily govern the development of infrastructure and services, and the subdivision and sale of lots in new residential subdivisions. Thus, in areas of unplanned growth, tools such as comprehensive planning, zoning, building codes, impact fees, adequate public facilities ordinances, and regulatory incentives for housing production cannot or often are not used to guide development along the urban fringe, at least not outside cities’ limited zone of influence (Durst 2016; Pendall et al. 2006).

In these unregulated contexts across the United States, informal subdivisions become a key means of providing affordable housing for the poor and offer a means of entry into the American dream of homeownership for low-income, minority, and immigrant households (Durst and Sullivan 2019) via channels that circumvent regulatory obstacles to participation. This type of informal housing is thus largely a manifestation of disadvantage and necessity. At the same time, however, residents often express satisfaction with their community and the lifestyle benefits—such as tranquility, open space, and proximity to family—that come with living in informal subdivisions (Nevárez Martínez, Rendón, and Arroyo 2021; Ward 2014). And, because housing production in informal subdivisions typically occurs through self-help, the dwelling is built, expanded, and repurposed to closely align with owners’ wants and needs (Ward 2014).

Although widespread reliance on self-help allows for the development of “sweat equity” through incremental improvements in the quality of homes over time, self-building also means that construction is often nonstandard or poor quality (Durst 2016). In accessing housing through these alternative channels, research finds that residents are exposed to

problems such as unsafe housing conditions, exploitative sales practices, and environmental and health risks in informal subdivisions (Larson 2002).

Informal Repurposing of Private Property

Informal repurposing of private property entails the transgression of property regulations to secure access to housing by squatting or other noncompliant uses. In the United States, informal repurposing arises in contexts with high rates of abandonment, as residents take over and occupy houses or other buildings left vacant and unattended. Informal repurposing of private property is largely a result of noncompliance by occupants, and nonenforcement by municipalities (Durst and Wegmann 2017).

Squatting is often a tactic in broader political struggles as well as a housing strategy (Herbert 2018), the latter of which we focus on here.¹ Researchers have identified squatting in Detroit (Herbert 2021; Kinder 2016), Chicago (Cunningham et al. 2003), Philadelphia (Adams 1986; Becher 2014), St. Louis (Gowan 2002), Lower East Side Manhattan (Starecheski 2016), Baltimore (Rosen 2020), and New Orleans (Marina 2017). Fairbanks (2014) examined property informally repurposed as unlicensed addiction recovery housing. As with informal infill, informal repurposing is often very hidden, but researchers have yet to identify ways of counting or tracking the prevalence of the latter across a broad geography.

Despite this gap, scholarship has articulated the logic of informality in declining cities (Herbert 2021). In the United States, urban decline is intertwined with economic, demographic, and technological shifts, and in many cities, interpersonal and institutional racism (Sugrue 1996). Dramatic population losses (often 30%–50%), corresponding declines in demand for property, and resultant widespread abandonment have hollowed out many urban areas across the northeastern and Midwestern Rust Belt (Hollander et al. 2009). A troubling feedback loop follows, wherein abandonment reduces the market value of neighboring properties, incentivizing real estate disinvestment, and furthering market collapse (Han 2014). Strained municipal budgets and a high volume of abandoned property create the sociospatial opportunity for informal repurposing of private property.

Even though property values are often startlingly low, declining cities have surprisingly unaffordable housing markets (Pitingolo 2015) largely because poverty rates are so high, voucher waitlists are often closed, and abandonment has decreased the supply of habitable housing. Housing is commonly very deteriorated and property taxes are often very high (raising rates is a common tactic for increasing municipal budgets), making homeownership too costly for many residents. The supply of affordable housing in declining markets is out of sync with high demand for it.

In response to the state’s inability to adequately address deterioration and abandonment, residents take it upon

themselves to repurpose and take over unused property. In some scholarship, squatting is envisioned as a long-term housing model used by the poor (Adams 1986; Cunningham et al. 2003; Herbert 2018), whereas in others, squatting is a short-term alternative to couch surfing (Marina 2017), or a complex practice that spans need, desire, form, and function (Herbert 2021; Starecheski 2016). For example, Herbert (2023) identifies three types of squatters in Detroit. Survival squatters are homeless residents who take over property as an alternative to shelters or doubling-up. Holdover squatters are renters or owners who remain in houses after foreclosure. And homesteader squatters are more privileged residents—often newcomers—who squat houses and vacant lots to fulfill lifestyle goals of living off the land akin to urban pioneers. For homesteader squatters, informal repurposing of private property is an avenue to homeownership, as many purchase the properties they occupy.

Informal repurposing of private property is also a nexus of inequality. Property that is abandoned and left vacant deteriorates quickly over time, so that residents who repurpose them confront dramatically substandard conditions (Herbert 2021; Starecheski 2016). Squatted housing may be missing windows and/or doors and may not provide complete protection from the elements. Water damage, infestation, and mold happen quickly without maintenance. And valuable materials are often stripped from abandoned housing, leaving them without electrical wiring, plumbing, appliances, and heating/cooling systems. Residents must either endure these problems or remediate them if they have the resources. Unable to prove legal residency, some squatters forego utilities while others hook them up illegally (Herbert 2021). While municipal budgets often prevent enforcing laws violated in the informal repurposing of private property, these residents technically take on the risk of fines or punishment for violations like trespass.

Informal Occupations of Public Space

Decreasing housing affordability and rising rates of homelessness nationwide are straining shelter and emergency housing services: for the first time, unsheltered homeless rates are higher than sheltered (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development [HUD] 2021). Research finds that people without formal housing often turn toward informal occupation of public space to create shelter which increasingly manifests as encampments of varying composition and longevity characterized by tents, make-shift shelters, personal vehicles, and RVs (Finnigan 2021). Informal occupation of public space may simultaneously be noncompliant and nonenforced regarding existing regulations, but also unregulated in other dimensions (as a sheltering form that is sometimes allowed to persist but has not been comprehensively regulated).

While media reports on homeless encampments in cities across the United States have been growing since the Great

Recession (Tars et al. 2017), empirical social science research has focused on larger, more enduring encampments on the west coast such as those in Seattle (Sparks 2017), Portland (Goodling 2020), Sacramento (Parker 2020), Fresno (Speer 2016), the Bay Area (Finnigan 2021; Herring 2014) and Orange County (Nevárez Martínez 2021a). Other research has focused on informal occupation of public space as “makeshift” sheltering in New York City (Dordick 1997), RV-living in Santa Barbara (Wakin 2005), “street” homelessness in Austin, Texas (Snow and Anderson 1993), or even homeless camping in forests (Cervený and Baur 2020). While street homelessness has been well studied since the 1980s, it is necessary to connect this research with informal housing studies because it is growing in response to decreasing affordability and is *de jure* illegal.

Nationally, unsheltered homelessness rates are especially high along the West Coast and Northeast (HUD 2021) where housing is most unaffordable, reflecting that homeless rates rise as median rental costs surpass 30 percent of median income (Glynn, Byrne, and Culhane 2021). As noted in our discussion of informal infill, the housing markets in these cities reflect geographic and regulatory constraints on formal housing production. However, the size and persistence of informal occupation of public space is influenced by socio-spatial factors, such as the existence of open/unused space, the public visibility of informal occupations, and the politicized toleration (or not) of encampments (Finnigan 2021). For example, Herring (2014) explains that secluded, isolated encampments in Fresno, Sacramento, Seattle, Ontario (California), and Portland were tolerated until they gained heightened visibility due to media attention. Other research has studied the dynamics of toleration, wherein cities either undertake efforts to further ban and criminalize these practices or accept informal occupations of public space as part of the landscape, sometimes resulting in legally sanctioned camps (Sparks 2017). While research suggests that the public’s view of the homeless has become more nuanced since the Great Recession (Tsai et al. 2017), there has historically existed a stigmatized perception that homelessness is a choice or results from individual failures (Snow and Anderson 1993). Such views, coupled with the fact that local politicians and bureaucrats often perpetuate the false notion that housing and other homeless services are widely available (Nevárez Martínez 2021b), provide a rationale for punitive approaches to the presence of informal occupations of public space in local communities. Informal occupations of public space that are unsanctioned but tolerated exist in a gray area that can shift quickly into criminalization depending on factors like local public opinion, political will, and resources for enforcement.

Of the four types of informal housing presented in this article, informal occupation of public space is unquestionably the most motivated by need. However, residents who informally occupy public space make decisions that best suit their preferences, irrespective of how limited their

options might be. Most residents of encampments do not prefer shelters. Residents express having more agency, dignity, and safety in encampments, and want to be able to live with partners, pets, and have space to store their belongings (Herring and Lutz 2015; Loftus-Farren 2011). Some unhoused residents encounter insurmountable bureaucratic barriers as they attempt to navigate the system and eventually choose the long-term security of encampments over temporary homeless shelter arrangements (Nevárez Martínez 2021a). Research on forest camping and vehicle living also finds diverse motivations overlapping homelessness and personal preference, reflecting agency amid constrained options (Cervený and Baur 2020; Redshaw 2017; Wakin 2005).

Like informal settlements in the Global South, residents who informally occupy public space in the United States face increased health risks due to limited access to water, sanitation and health services, and other basic necessities such as electricity or complete protection from the elements (Finnigan 2021; Parker 2020). And, even when informal occupations are tolerated, residents face the constant threat of tickets/fines, eviction or sweeps, and loss of personal belongings including IDs and medications because their sheltering practices are *de jure* illegal.

Synthesizing across Types of Informal Housing

By analyzing and abstracting from existing research, we have created a typology of informally developed housing in the United States. Identifying commonalities across these types connects research from dispersed contexts and facilitates more robust consideration of how they expand access to housing for those excluded from formal options, the challenges they pose to planners and public officials, and the potential efficacy or unintended consequences of state intervention. Here, we identify five common features that drive the production, use, and conditions of these four types of informal housing development.

First, informal housing arises where the supply of formal housing is out of sync with demand for it. Each type appears to be largely a function of the fact that formal housing—even across markedly different spatial and regulatory environments—is unaffordable and unavailable for many low-income residents. Because housing in the informal market is, generally, less expensive (or even free), latent demand for formal housing translates into effective demand for informal housing. This imbalance between the supply of formal housing and the demand for it promotes the production and use of informal housing. In the case of urban decline, the imbalance is inverted: the supply of land and housing simply far outstrips the demand for it, leading to disinvestment and abandonment, further reinforcing the downward cycle of decline. Although informal housing may be present in other market contexts, existing research

suggests these four types are most prevalent where the demand-supply imbalance is the greatest.

Second, each type responds to features of the local socio-spatial environment. High-cost housing markets with geographic constraints on expansion produce informal infill or informal occupation of public space. The ability for urban development to expand outwards as informal subdivisions is enabled by the geography and regulatory environment of interior south/southwestern regions of the United States. Informal occupation of public space is rarely found in declining Rust Belt cities because people in need of housing can informally repurpose private property (Gowan 2002). The persistence of encampments (informal occupation of public space) is explained more so by spatial visibility and social/political support for different responses, rather than their legality (Herring 2014).

Third, informal housing arises predominantly from disadvantage and necessity. But there is evidence across all four types that the production and use of informal housing also reflects desire and preference (and even sometimes elements of privilege, see Herbert 2021). Both owners and nonowners benefit from certain lifestyle advantages and express a preference for specific features informal housing often provides. By and large, however, it is financial constraint or economic burdens that appear to drive the production and use of all four types of informal housing, whether in the context of gentrifying NYC, suburban LA, exurban Texas, or disinvested Detroit.

Fourth, despite these elements of preference and desire, all four types of informal housing are characterized by substandard material conditions, pose threats to the health and safety of residents, and put residents at risk of negative legal (and possibly financial) repercussions. With informal infill, subdivisions, and repurposing of private property, these threats/risks are not essential to the practice. It is possible for residents to build backyard units or self-build their housing in informal subdivisions in accordance with safe building standards. It is possible for abandoned housing to be secured and maintained, and/or for squatters to renovate their homes to ensure safe and healthy structures. It is the lack of resources and/or knowledge among people who are producing or using these informal types of housing, and the lack of state oversight and intervention that enable threats to safety and health to continue. The risks for residents informally occupying public space can certainly be mediated, but tents and vehicles cannot conform to habitability standards. Legal threats exist for types of informal housing that violate laws and regulations, namely informal infill, repurposing of private property, and occupation of public space.

Fifth, reiterating an important point made by other scholars, the state is implicated in the production, use, and conditions of all four types of informal housing, such as when authorities fail to enforce trespass laws or building codes, or fail to regulate subdivision development in rural areas (Durst and Wegmann 2017). But each type of informal housing

responds to local housing market conditions. This suggests that the state is more broadly responsible through benign neglect: the deliberate failure to prevent or ameliorate inaccessible/unaffordable housing markets that leave many residents seeking to fulfill housing wants and needs through informal means.

Conclusion

Attention to the informal dynamics of housing in the U.S. and other Global North contexts has grown extensively over the past decade. With this expansion has come a kind of conceptual messiness, as scholars work through how to adopt the framework of informality from its rich history in Global South contexts and use it productively and appropriately to make sense of phenomena in the Global North. Informal housing scholarship focused on northern contexts has contributed important case studies, formulated novel techniques for quantifying the extent of hidden types, further challenged notions of northern “exceptionalism” to problems of state dysfunction, and called attention to significant domains of risk and hardship for already vulnerable populations. In this article, we promote conceptual clarity by organizing and analyzing this messiness, creating a typology of four types of informal housing in the United States. Despite seemingly dramatic differences between, for example, squatted houses in Philadelphia and unpermitted backyard apartments in LA, they share important commonalities. These four types share common features of their production, use, and conditions: (1) informal housing arises in contexts where the formal supply of housing is out of sync with demand; (2) each type responds to features of the local sociospatial environment; (3) informal housing arises out of both necessity and preference; (4) informal housing is characterized by substandard material conditions, poses threats to residents’ health and safety, and exposes them to legal risks; and (5) the state is broadly implicated through benign neglect of affordable housing.

This article makes important contributions to theoretical understandings of informal housing in the United States, which may also apply to other Global North contexts. Recent theoretical developments by Durst and Wegmann (2017) and Harris (2018) have provided important but broad scattershot frameworks for situating informal housing in U.S. and comparative contexts. Focusing explicitly on housing that is informally developed—by violating or being denied the protection of regulations (per Durst and Wegmann 2017)—this article first demarcates this specific sphere of housing informality in the United States. Informality is not solely a characteristic of development in the Global South (Roy 2005). This demarcation alone suggests other important spheres of informal housing that should be examined and further theorized such as informal transfers, financing, living arrangements, or housing searches.

Furthermore, by articulating commonalities across very different empirical phenomena typically only united by the term “informal,” this typology brings coherence to a sphere of informality—and a series of housing crises—in the United States. These four types of informal housing production are very different in their material form and condition, regional manifestations, durability, and relationship to regulations (Durst and Wegmann 2017), such that articulating what is common offers an important contribution to our conceptualization of informal housing production in the United States. By articulating commonalities across diverse phenomena, this article links the type of informal housing produced with common sociospatial contexts across the United States (decline, constrained growth, unplanned growth) and localized housing market conditions. This demonstrates that the way that informal housing production is interwoven with formal housing (per Durst and Wegmann 2017) is context dependent (shaped by factors such as density, modal housing types, and markets) and its visibility is shaped by local conditions of the built and natural environment. The way that informal housing practices may scale up and become more coordinated (per Harris 2018) depends in part on the type of informal housing in question: encampments in constrained growth cities and unregulated peri-urban subdivisions are likely to be more visible and involve more coordination among residents, while informal infill and repurposing are more easily hidden and participants likely more fragmented. The common driver of unaffordable housing markets implicates the state in a new way, beyond the creation and enforcement of regulations: through benign neglect.

Benign neglect—intentional government disregard—can be traced back to a 1970 memo from Senator Patrick Moynihan advocating inaction about race and civil rights in the United States instead of affirmative corrective measures to address racial inequities (Moynihan 1970). This policy of ignoring was a deliberate decision to avoid any responsibility to advance the rights and living conditions of African Americans in the United States. Benign neglect as a policy choice is not limited to racial inequality and can be found in each of the four manifestations highlighted in this text and is a major way in which the state is implicated in the production of informal housing.

This typology also offers important takeaways for future social science research and planning practitioners. First, researchers can look for certain types of informal housing in similar housing markets or sociospatial contexts. Does Portland, Oregon—a geographically constrained, high-cost, highly regulated context—have informal infill? If not, why? Researchers interested in informal repurposing of private property might examine other cities suffering from decline and vacancy.

Second, this typology promotes cross-context and cross-region comparison. An important task for future research is to sketch broader connections across highly varied Global North contexts. These types of informal housing in the

United States may have counterparts in other countries that provide useful comparison for understanding how they are shaped by national culture or regulatory requirements. For example, how do regulatory responses to informal infill differ in Los Angeles versus London where “beds in sheds” proliferate (Lombard 2019)? How do informal subdivisions in rural Texas compare with those in Southwest England (Griffin, McClymont, and Sheppard 2021)? How do the risks of informal infill basement apartments differ in constrained growth contexts like New York City versus Vancouver BC (Mendez and Quastel 2015)? How do formalization strategies for informal occupations of public space differ in Seattle versus Rome (Bermann and Marinaro 2014)? How might revitalization efforts impact squatters in Cleveland in comparison with Berlin (Holm and Kuhn 2011)?

Third, by demarcating types of housing that are informally produced in the United States, we can begin to carefully systematize links with other informal housing-centered practices identified in recent scholarship, such as financing, transferring, searching, or sharing. Are there particular markets for informal subdivisions or informally repurposed private property? Do renters of informal infill units have formal leases or handshake deals? Do they have the same protections as renters of formal units? Informal housing is often used by vulnerable populations, including poor and immigrant communities—does informality characterize other dimensions of their lives such as employment, housing searches, or financing? These continuities may be increasingly important for research in Global North contexts as wealth inequality continues to increase.

By creating a typology of informal housing and identifying common drivers of production, use, and conditions across variegated market and geographic contexts, this article offers tools for planners who, as agents of the state, are centrally implicated in the processes that give rise to informal housing. Planners must acknowledge the rationality of particular types of informal housing (such as why residents pursue informal rather than formal housing or why it takes the particular form it does), which requires considering local context. By linking types of informal housing with different geographic and housing market conditions, this analysis suggests what planners should look for in their communities, even when informal housing may be very hidden. Facilitating conversations about informality across contexts could allow planners to identify commonalities and coherent strategies so that decisions in one location do not exacerbate informal conditions in another. To intervene in the problems that informal housing poses, planners must also consider why residents decide to make tradeoffs between risks and fulfilling needs/wants when they select their housing. Finally, planning lays the groundwork for regulations like zoning and code enforcement which are centrally implicated in the production of informal housing. But planners are also often involved in the creation of housing strategies that promote a government policy of benign neglect vis-à-vis affordability,

thereby contributing to informal housing production. This recognition should lead planning professionals to unpack more precisely how they are involved in informal housing, what issues are at stake, but also how they can proceed.

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ORCID iD

Claire W. Herbert  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3650-7797>

Note

1. In some contexts, squatting refers to land occupations and self-built housing (see Ren 2018).

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Author Biographies

Claire W. Herbert is an Assistant Professor of Sociology at University of Oregon. Her research centers on sociological and urban

studies of property law violations and regulatory enforcement, informal housing in the United States, and the colonial dynamics of property and race.

Noah J. Durst is an Assistant Professor of Urban and Regional Planning at Michigan State University. His research interests include informal housing, municipal annexation, and spatial mismatches in housing and employment.

Deyanira Nevárez Martínez is an Assistant Professor of Urban and Regional Planning at Michigan State University. Her research interests include interrogating the role of the state in homelessness and housing precarity and informality, Latinx homelessness, and the criminalization of poverty.