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**Informality and Spatial Confinement in the Olympic City**  
Rio de Janeiro in Times of BRICS

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# Informality and Spatial Confinement in the Olympic City

## Rio de Janeiro in Times of BRICS

Frank Müller

### Abstract

In this paper I offer an analysis of the critical place that “informality” occupies in the urbanistic reordering of the “Cidade Olímpica” Rio de Janeiro. Contextualizing it in Brazil’s claim to an emergent geopolitical position as a BRICS country, I explore how this reordering intersects with spatial confinement of the urban poor. I draw from examples of real estate entrepreneurialism, resettlements and territorial conflicts in Barra da Tijuca and Jacarepaguá, two of Rio de Janeiro’s rapidly transforming areas. Drawing from Judith Butler’s concept of performativity (1993), I introduce informality as a performed role and volatile ascription allowing us to understand how urban actors bargain their influence vis-à-vis unstable urban planning processes. In the making of the Olympic City, informality functions (1) as a signifier of what is perceived to be a threat to justify the stigmatization and subsequent confinement of marginalized communities as a result of local infrastructure projects related to mega-events; (2) as a signifier to justify defensive interventions against the municipal government and real estate developers by an organized upper middle-class; and (3) as a signifier around which resistances and alliances form between activist groups, researchers and NGOs on the edges of the urban fabric. Correlating urban informality and spatial confinement allows for an understanding of a spatialized, contested and performed stateness underlying city branding and also of the political mobilization of the urban poor despite of hegemonic marginalization in cities of the Global South.

**Keywords:** performativity | informality | resettlements | Rio de Janeiro

### Biographical Notes

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## 1. Introduction

“We are not second, but first class. As a formerly colonized nation we had the obsession of being inferior. [...] These Olympics do not belong to the government, but to the Brazilian people.” (Presidente Lula da Silva: 2009) Commenting on the decision of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) in favor of Brazil to be the first nation of South America to host the Olympic Games, former president Lula da Silva highlighted its potential: The world’s largest sports event would prove an emerging country’s emancipation from colonial heritage and unite Brazilians towards national progress.

Which urban reordering does such imaginary of progress and national identity spur? What is the role of urban development for achieving such geopolitically relevant ascendance in the global ranking of nations? Socio-political dynamics in metropolises of the “Global South” are deeply marked by a postcolonial heritage (Mabin 2014, Home 2014, Vainer 2014). To state a commonplace: Due to structural dependencies of the “underdeveloped” regions of the global south, urbanization has produced a dispossessed working class, the “marginalized” (Castells 1973), living in “informal” urban conditions (Hardoy and Satterthwaite 1987, Angotti 2013). Ever since this term was coined (Hart 1973, ILO 1972), “informal” urbanization has been perceived to be a threat to progress and modernization. In this discourse, imperatives of economic growth and improving life quality in a globalizing inter-city competition are interwoven. As an effect, we can observe a spatial dynamic of “self-enclosure” of the privileged classes into privately serviced, gated residencies, and the spatial confinement of the urban poor via resettlement, policing and military control of stigmatized areas (Bayón and Saraví 2012, Caldeira 2000). In metropolises of the urban south, such spatial polarization constitutes a disparaging dichotomy between the *favelas* and the “formal city”: On the one side, this dichotomy aggravates further the highly uneven distribution of material, social and symbolic capital, on the other, it reinforces a paternalistic, fragmenting and de-politicizing treatment of the urban poor.

This paper studies the spatial effects of such urban reordering, its underlying social interaction, narratives and discourse. Drawing on land conflicts, enclosures and resettlements in pre-Olympic Rio de Janeiro, this paper argues, firstly, that Olympic City branding functions as a discursive and material “stage” for Rio’s Global City aspirations (Plano Estratégico 2013). In the narrative of progress “informal” urbanization justifies a set of social and spatial transformations to locate the urban poor on the edge of a “social or national order” (Agier 2011: 279). However, the paper argues secondly, confinement and stigmatization, which motivates it, are also politically contested processes in which urban informality occupies a central place for emancipative struggles. The multiple forms by which these logics of confinement correlate do not only bring about diverse

spatial forms – gated communities vis-à-vis social housing complexes (Low 2001, Caldeira 2000, Coy 2006) – but have also provided a transnational stage for the political claims of the dispossessed (Wacquant 2007a). This allows for understanding the urban poor not as a ghettoized whole, disconnected from the global economy, but instead as agents in a global order of encampment and elite enclosure (Agier 2011). Furthermore, studying such local-global interdependency sheds doubt upon assumptions about private, gated and exclusive urbanization processes outside the reach of the state, as literature on the neoliberal city seems to suggest (McKenzie 1994, Brenner and Theodore 2002). While global city aspirations might bring about increasing socio-economic polarization (Sassen 1991 and 2013, Brenner and Keil 2006, Dupont 2011) de facto globalization from below (Mathews et al. 2012) needs further academic attention on the embodied practices that actively produce the condition of “stateness” in everyday social and political interaction (Painter 2006). Studying stateness in the performed, contested, relationship of informality and confinement allows for locating Brazil’s geopolitical aspirations in the concrete everyday practices of heterogeneous actors and common, albeit antagonistic normative expectations from “the state”. As a result, the increasing conferment of administrative tasks and governmental services to private real estate developers, acclaimed by some as a quasi-natural necessity facing state weakness, can be identified as clever strategy of the state.

This paper is structured as follows. The next section contextualizes this argument in Rio de Janeiro as a BRICS metropolis and introduces into the research areas of Barra da Tijuca and Jacarepaguá. The following section discusses the paper’s methodological contribution to the debate on urban informality, arguing for a performative shift. The empirical section accounts for the complexity of marginalization by presenting three guises of informality: threat, distinction and alliance/emancipation. The paper concludes that informality stands out as a signifier around which urban planning conflicts arouse and are fought out. Therefore we need to account for the simultaneity of land conflicts, distinction and emancipation that shape urbanization in general, and spatial confinement processes, in particular.

## **2. Global Connections and Local Confinements – Rio’s Olympic Stage**

Over the last decade, increasing economic, military and development initiatives in sub-Saharan Africa (Schlesinger 2014) and Haiti (Trote Martins 2014, Santos and Almeida Cravo 2014) have brought Brazil an increased global recognition and levered its chances to become a permanent member on the UN Security Council. Brazilian actors’ experience with urban warfare, resettlements and social housing programs in



“south-south cooperation” (Hönke und Müller 2015, Abdenur 2013) have contributed to its growing international reputation as BRICS country (Turok 2014: 131f.).

The Global City/Olympic City framework provides a local stage to foster these geopolitical aspirations. Branding Rio de Janeiro as “Olympic City” (Prefeitura 2014) has gone hand in hand with applying investment-friendly, securitization-oriented measures. Such city branding is not a singular moment of transition, but forms part of a process of positioning the city as a Global City (Diniz 2013, Sassen 2013). It is a framework that guides urban transformations in Rio de Janeiro regarding infrastructure (the Bus Rapid Transport System, BRT), land valorization (in the port area), and securitization (by installing Pacifying Police Units (UPP) in marginalized areas). These three mechanisms are sided by social housing programs which imply resettlement from so-called risk areas and areas of high (infrastructural) investment activity. Motivating positive international recognition, the City Statute (Lei n° 10.257/2001) has effectively translated the constitutional definition of a “social function of property” (Art. 182 and 183 of the Brazilian Constitution) as it grants more rights to lower-income classes (Fernandes 2011).<sup>1</sup> Rio de Janeiro’s “Morar Carioca” and the federal program “Minha Casa Minha Vida” (MCMV) move inner-cities frontiers by either integrating the so-called “favelas” into the tax-paying, property-titled and serviced city (Lei N° 1656/2003) or resettling inhabitants into newly built social housing complexes (Lei N° 11.977). Moreover, these programs bind the beneficiaries into decade-long relationships of financial debt. Current urban reordering attempts to overcome the image of a prevailing chaotic urban sprawl and “social cleansing” (Maricato 2010). Together with the increasing militarization of marginalized settlements (Freeman 2014), the programs can be read as neoliberal strategies with a tendency to promote an “internal colonialism” (Hoffman and Centeno 2003: 363).

The southwestern expansion of Rio de Janeiro, with the administrative units of Barra da Tijuca and Jacarepaguá, is emblematic for such neoliberal, yet often paternalistic and stigmatizing, fragmented urban development. Over the period from 1991 to 2010, the rapid growth in these areas has been contrasted by a population decline in the

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1 MCMV was Brazil’s direct reaction to the global financial crisis of 2008. It is financed by public banks (BNDES, Caixa Econômica Federal and Banco do Brasil) and allocates an investment volume of R\$ 34 billion into social housing projects in form of interest-less loans for households of low (5-10 min. salaries) and lowest (0-5) income sectors, with almost 50% of a total amount of 71,925 projects provided for the lowest income sector.

city's central areas.<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, from 2009-2013, new constructions for residential use have been licensed predominantly in the southwestern parts of Rio de Janeiro, with the exception of lower income class settlements which have occurred predominantly on the western limits (Prefeitura de Cidade de Rio – Armazém de Dados 2016). While we can observe constantly high growth in both residential and non-residential uses in the two areas under study taking a closer look we can note a contrastive tendency. While Jacarepaguá shows a strong increase in new construction (both residential and non-residential), Barra da Tijuca experiences less new construction. Yet, the increase is taking place predominantly in the upper middle class neighborhoods of Jacarepaguá (which include Freguesia, Taquara and Jacarepaguá). This tendency goes together with a decrease in the size of newly built housing units over the years 2009 to 2013 which is notably stronger in Jacarepaguá than in Barra.

We can deduce a strategy of land valorization in socio-economically differentiating terms (segregation). In order to maintain an equal socio-economic composition, the offered housing units would have to become smaller if the price per square meter in apartments is rising. "Informal" settlements can be viewed by city planners as an invasion of private property but they are also in some ways a welcome obstacle since they temporarily prevent the construction of apartment buildings as long as the resettlement has not been completed. This avoids an inflation of the real estate market and allows for stabilizing real estate's high-price structure. Moreover, it justifies the fencing-in of land and the subsequent construction of privately administrated condominiums.

This reordering of the city induced by the Olympic City branding effort has been accompanied by another transformation: Rio de Janeiro is no longer among the metropolises with high population growth rates (Santos 2008). Its urban crisis, then, is no longer defined in terms of uncontrolled urban sprawl, as in the classical approaches to Latin American cities (Hardoy and Satterthwaite 1987, Gilbert 1996). Rather, the urban crisis shows itself in multiple and interdependent land occupation practices and resulting conflicts.

We can assume a conflictive tension at work here: Non-licensed growth of and in marginalized settlements maintains their inhabitants in a legal limbo in which eviction remains a constant threat. Investment-intensive urbanization appears as a solution for both this legal instability and claims to a first-world aesthetic and urban order. This

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2 In the central areas, residential construction is notably decreasing and non-residential construction is growing strongly, owing to the revitalization of the port area. Over this period, growth has taken place mainly in the (south-)western areas of Barra da Tijuca, Jacarepaguá, Santa Cruz, Campo Grande, Bangú and Guaritiba. At the same time, population has been diminishing in central areas, stagnated in the southern zone (Flamengo, Botafogo, Copacabana and Ipanema) and slightly grown in the northern part of the city (IBGE).

neoliberal maneuver is strengthening the socio-political position of private developers in urban planning vis-à-vis an allegedly weak state, which fails to regulate urban development. An analysis of everyday practices and strategies of urban planning complicates a completely dualistic picture of order and informality. The following section elaborates a methodology to study this relationship of informality and spatial confinement in greater detail.

### **3. A Performative Approach to Urban Informality**

Such urban crisis is co-constituted by a crisis of the signifier “informality”: Throughout its ever-expanding application for describing a huge variety of urban phenomena, it has become detached from its original meaning, becoming usable to justify spatial interventions of all kinds, it seems. Urban informality, in its original meaning, referred to neighborhoods lacking property titles and adequate urban infrastructure – in short, to those fast-growing peripheries of Latin American cities that provided shelter for poor migrants (Hart 1973, Castells 1972). While supranational discourse is resilient to critiques and maintains this definition (UN Habitat 2015, Cities Alliance 2012, World Bank 2010) academic discussion has gradually shifted towards more power-critical and relational studies of informal urbanization. New approaches have been developed from various angles in the fields of urban sociology, anthropology, political science and geography. Authors have rendered the notion postcolonial (Varley 2013), drawn perspectives southwards (Patel 2014), let it travel to cities “of the North” (Ward 2004) and generally criticized its persistent use in urban politics and academia (Lombard 2010). However, the ubiquity of the term, the various actors and practices that it refers to – including not only the urban poor, but also middle class and elite activities – casts doubt on its further analytical usefulness.

The hollowing out of informality as a signifier can be brought into a productive analytical tension with its persisting use. The way in which informality is ascribed to the self and/or the other can be of critical utility to study the social space (Bourdieu 1984) in which spatial confinement is produced and contested between and among several groups in the city. The section therefore first briefly recalls the debate on urban informality which is of central importance in understanding spatial confinement as a process of othering (Spivak 1985). In a second step, it proposes a practice- and narrative based approach to spatial confinement and stateness.

### 3.1 Doing Informality

The decisive *locus* where questions of socio-economic development, security and political stability in Latin American cities have been fought out is the frontier between formality and informality. The allegedly informal slums or *favelas* are frequently depicted as places of decay, criminal gangs, and poverty in both academia and in the public eye (Wacquant 2007a). In terms of modernization theories and politics (de Soto 1989), formalization is in turn understood as a key driver for economic prosperity and increasing social mobility. In Brazil, the shift from neglecting to integrating those deteriorated areas into formal urban development has been considered a central aspect of the democratic transition (Cities Alliance 2012, Rivera 2009.)

Informality first entered urban studies as a category to understand capitalism's tendency to marginalize the migrant population on the rural-urban interface of Latin American metropolises. The various studies and policy responses reproduced a conceptual dualism between, on the one side, structural exclusion of informal workers as a necessary result of capitalist development (Castells 1972) and, on the other side, a culture of poverty that characterized solidarity and social networks in these marginal spaces (Perlman 1977).

While the interdependency of formal and informal methods of urbanization is widely acknowledged (Connolly 2009, Hernández et al. 2010) the effects of territorial stigmatization are less studied (see Huchzermeyer 2014 for an exception). The decade-long, debates have been emptying out the class-struggle related meaning of the terms and related them to other cleavages, such as criminality or environmental degradation. Informality has entered the everyday language of social, political and economic actors. It acts as a signifier for social distinction and to justify the construction of physical frontiers in the urban environment (Haesbart 2014). Transnational perspectives (Roy and AlSayyad 2004) have shown that informality is not only a “mode of the production of space” (Roy 2009: 826), which exceeds the narrow focus on urban poor, but is also a method employed by state authorities to legitimize involuntary resettlements (Yiftachel 2009).

In ever-densifying, fragmented Latin American cities, informality has become a political tool to define the limits of order – a “hegemonic operation” that “demonizes [the other] in order to signify itself” (Laclau 2007: 38). In this sense, I suggest to speak of it as an empty signifier whose use is guided by the interests of groups in society which they articulate in political interaction (Laclau 2007: 37). Such a perspective highlights the

particular dynamics of conflict, appropriation of land and hegemony on a local level, and the transformative social processes that stand behind it.

Owing to this methodological shift, informality is no longer to be seen as neutrally opposed to planning but as a part of the strategies of state and non-state actors to exclude the urban poor. Urban planning becomes a tool for the “management the undesirables” (Agier 2011: 32) that generalizes informality without confronting the quite differentiated situation to which the signifier is ascribed. In order to account for its situational social meanings, I argue that in social interaction, informality signifies the other’s lack of legal status (territory), or acting in ways that are out of societal norms. In that sense, informality is used to distinguish the other and his/her territories from one’s own normality. Thus, I propose to understand informality – borrowing from gender studies – as a socially performed role, a doing informality (Butler 1993, West and Zimmermann 1987) – informality functions similar to gender roles, which are socially constructed and performed. Informality is an ascribed and situationally self-assumed role that conditions one’s position and acting in social space by the material, social and symbolic forms of capital which one possesses.

### **3.2 Relating Informality and Confinement**

In urban studies, confinement has become a powerful category ever since early studies on the American Ghetto by Louis Wirth (1938). While Wirth studied the specific urban form of confined Jewish settlements, the study of ghettos and ghettoization is now concerned with marginalization and stigmatization of territories and subjects in more general terms (Wacquant 2007b, Slater 2009). Beyond its physical expressions, confinement then refers to normative, moral and aesthetic practices and narratives about the self/other divide which regulates access to the city. Confinement implies immobility, in its technical and physical, but also social and symbolic terms.

In the context of Latin American metropolises, where spatial exclusion and marginalization appear as norm and not as exception, studies focus on the role of spatial confinements in territorial reordering, as well as its effects on groups and individuals that inhabit the city. In this exclusionary process, the “urban outcast” (Wacquant 2007a: 68) is constituted as dangerous stranger. Such stranger then is also “the Other” in Spivak’s terms (1985: 252), who allows the normalized subject to reinstate itself as the center of normality. As an effect, the threatening other is confronted with military oppression or involuntary resettlements. This analytic shift towards understanding urbanity as inherently conflictive and exclusive contrasts to ideal-typical definitions of the city in terms of functionality, density and organizational heterogeneity.

This performative operation of doing informality allows dominant groups to claim their socio-political position with the effect of exclusion and marginalization. This suggests that it is necessary to understand urban planning in a wider sense and to address the prosaic spatial guises of confinement as territorial forms of state production. Relating spatial confinement and informality therefore can build on ethnographically informed investigation of practices and narratives by which groups aspire, contest and claim regulations. This in turn allows for addressing how “*everyday life is permeated by the social relations of stateness, and vice versa*” (Painter 2006: 753), suggesting a procedural understanding of state that does not at the same time reify it.

The notion of confinement allows for understanding urban crisis – the paradoxical persistence of legal instability despite stagnating growth rates – through informality: It firstly enables study of the practices and narratives that underlie the use of informality as a signifier in urban marginalization processes; second, it allows us to decipher the correlation of self-enclosures (i.e. gated communities) and resettlements. Such spatiality of othering can be understood as a correlation of architecture, norms, practices and narratives that characterize urban land conflicts. Spatial confinement enables social groups – such as inhabitants of gated communities, or real estate developers – to present their particular, incarnated understanding of informality as powerful universality.

The question for the empirical analysis then is: Who profits from the urban crisis, and the guises of performing it? The object of study are the practices and narratives that constitute the guises of confinement and doing informality.

#### **4. Contested Globality, Contested Confinement: Land Conflicts in the Western Areas of Rio**

The southwestern areas of Rio de Janeiro are emblematic for an investment-friendly rapid urban expansion, but also for a fragmented socio-spatial reality and increasing segregation on the micro-level. Here, branding Rio de Janeiro as a global city is backed by the assumption that private investment leads to structured, formal, urban development by private investors. Informality has acquired a highly politicized meaning in the area as it serves as a signifier for justifying specific urban interventions while de-justifying the practices of other urban actors.

This section elaborates on this dynamic by drawing on three interrelated guises of informality: The first deals with informality as a threat and focuses on how the signifier works in a strategy of othering employed by real estate developers; the second guise

turns towards the effects of current urban interventions in the area by looking at the defensive actions taken by homeowner associations (HA) of those living in upper middle class condominiums as well as on the ways in which informality allows for social distinction; the third guise discusses how involuntary resettlements relate to strategic appropriations of the signifier informality.

#### 4.1 Informality as Threat

In this first guise, the principal actors are real estate developers. These actors portray informal settlements as a threat to urban development. This narrative has strengthened the real estate developers' position vis-à-vis public urban planning authorities despite a certain legal instability underlying their actions.

The largest parts of the research areas of Barra da Tijuca and Jacarepaguá are owned by private actors. As one of the biggest landowners (*latifundario*) of Rio de Janeiro, Pasquale Mauro has been involved in legal conflicts regarding land acquisition and development in pre-Olympic preparations. The land, which had been in family possession since 1849, was administered from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards by a landholders' trust. It has never been registered in the state cadaster and the respective land titles are until today under constant legal dispute. The legal basis of the landowners' claims are being investigated by the National Serviço Nacional de Informações (National Intelligence Service, SNI). While this example of non-compliance with norms and the dubious legal backing of land-holding in the area (*O Globo* 3.7.2011) can be seen as a form of elite informality (Roy 2012), real estate developers justify such practices by claiming to contribute to the area's ordered urban development. As an effect, such narratives justify their privileged position in dominating urban development in the western areas of the city. As part of this narrative, informality is related to environmental deterioration, economic failure and criminality whose culprits are the settlements of the urban poor. It is on the basis of this narrative that developers influence municipality's decision on how to distribute public investment in infrastructure (Maricato 1996) and urbanistic norms (Fernandes 2013, Projeto de Lei Complementar No. 45/07, cit. in Ferreira Guerra 2011: 4).

Being among the most luxury and recent examples of privately administrated gated development, Ilha Pura, located in Barra da Tijuca, promises to generate symbolic and social capital on the basis of decade-old values. The project's portfolio makes reference to Lucio Costa's masterplan for the area, published in 1969 (Hosken and Odebrecht 2013). According to that first planning document for the region, urban development should be publicly planned, yet privately exercised and oriented towards

social and environmental sustainability. Costa expected an “irreversible process” that would convert the area into a new Central Business District (Costa 1969: 5), thus integrating it into the growing metropolis. In order to guarantee the high expectations, urban planners delegated projects to individual architects and constructors but at the same time maintained them under strict control (1969: 10). The marketing director of Ilha Pura, Ricardo Corrêa, maintained this narrative as he promoted the contribution of the project to local development. According to Corrêa, the projects of the largest constructors of gated communities (*bairros-condomínio*) in the area:

[...] will reduce social costs, because the inhabitants will be more mobile, in addition to reducing the number of irregular settlements in the area. With less *favelização* (“favelaization”), we will have less contamination and better preservation of the natural environment (Corrêa, cited in Pfeifer 2011: 17).

The cited statement, however, implies a shift in narrative and practice – from the normative expectation that the state and the municipality should provide infrastructure, as in the early phase of real estate boom (Silva 2006), towards assuming that real estate developers are the promoters of ordered urban development including housing *and* infrastructure, thus have added a role that actively takes over governmental functions.

Moreover, such position claims to normatively reconfigure the socio-spatial structure of the area through walls and limits based on aesthetic and moral values. As an important case, the local municipality (*sub-prefeitura*) has employed the program *ecolimites* (“eco-limits”) that builds physical walls on the edge of existing precarious settlements (Portal 2012), arguing that they would threaten the natural environment in the area. To date, the program has been employed for a single purpose: It limits the growth of marginalized settlements through physical walls in addition to narrative strategies of de-legitimization. The strategic unevenness of such confinement strategy becomes evident when considering that not informal settlement but rather middle and upper middle class areas represent the major share of growth into the “Mata Atlântica”, the green belt on the city’s edge (Vainer et al. 2013). This suggests that the ascription of informality, as a powerful form of narrative othering, effectively produces confinement of the urban poor. The ascription of informality justifies the confinement of those settlements that seem to threaten a form of progress that follows global ideals such as sustainability, architectonic forms and luxury lifestyles. Informality is the other against which such positions stand out in progressive contrast. In this narrative, informality functions also as a timely operator when progress is opposed to poverty or backward, noxious development.



It also becomes clear that urbanistic reordering is producing stateness through confinement. By destabilizing the legal and social structures of the resettled community forced out by the development, real estate developers can position themselves as guarantors of social order. Such discursive and material process accumulates to what Laclau describes as “pure threat” (2007: 38). That is, informality acts as a signifier that serves to reestablish the hegemonic group’s – in this case the real estate developers – power to define the limits of order by assimilating all tendencies that potentially threaten the city’s order. However, the dynamics of this process of confinement through the use of informality as signifier demand a more detailed discussion of how social positions are fought out (in the following guise), and how the threat of eviction is contested and strategically appropriated by the affected population (in the third guise).

## 4.2 Informality and Social Distinction

This second guise turns to a use of the signifier informality which produces social distinction. It is mainly applied by the homeowner associations (HA) of two private gated communities in the research area, the Vila Panamericana and Cidade Jardim. The HAs organize cooperation among community residents and represent the inhabitants in urban planning issues. In their narrative, informality functions as a signifier that justifies the defensive organization of neighbors against informal settlements in areas where the state is seen as weak or absent.

The HAs’ claim to being the protectors of economic and personal safety intersect with a self-positioning as inhabitants of a “first world” urban environment (ASCIJA 2015). The formation of such associations is explained by the sales consultant of Cidade Jardim as reaction to the failure of the municipality to guarantee predictable and ordered urban development: “Due to the absence of government attention, we have promoted the foundation of a homeowner association” (Interview<sup>3</sup>, Edesio, April 14, 2015). He argues that constructors and clients would share an interest for increasing the value of their community by “guaranteeing an aesthetic identity, based on commonly shared rules” (Interview, Edesio, April 14, 2015).

Through the creation of a defensive institution, the homeowners actively partake in urban planning in the area. Behind the narration of a necessity to guarantee aesthetic and moral values lies the aspiration for the own communities to stand out as showcases of ordered urbanization. As part of this strategy, the associations pressure local public authorities to act against allegedly informal settlements. In a public hearing, for instance, the licensing of new upper middle-class condominiums was denounced as being a

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3 This interview and all others were conducted by the author and translated from Portuguese.

“criminal act” (*O Globo* 22.5.2015) by the HA from Vila Panamericana. The leader of the association explains that his community could not accept the newly built area because of its insufficient sanitation system: “The government’s failure is menacing our well-being. This is an area of wild development, with everyone invading without limits. And authorities need to be controlled as they let everyone do here what they want” (Interview, Erick, May 23, 2015).

Interestingly, the use of the signifier “informality” here is used not only to stigmatize settlements of the “urban poor”, but also to inform on the practices of real estate developers – and public authorities’ paralysis/non-action, respectively. The HA’s identify the “disordered growth of population” (*Nosso Bairro* 2015:8) as the area’s severest problem. Yet, in line with the signifier’s dominant meaning, informality becomes co-terminus with growing crime rates and environmental degradation – thus again stigmatizing the informal “invasion” of the area by the urban poor (Interview, HA delegate Waldeck, May 5, 2015). Through the use of informality, the HA positions itself as corrective institution in urban planning vis-à-vis state failure.

This double use of informality is backed by a third central aspect: The HAs’ aspirations to symbolic distinction. The HA from Vila Panamericana supports a legislative attempt to create a new borough, the “Barra Olímpica” (Lei 807/2010, *O Globo* 17/12/2014). According to the project’s consultant, such denomination would increase the economic value of real estate in the area (Interview, Caban, April 11, 2015). Beyond that, the project would also reshape the administrative limit between the areas of Jacarepaguá and Barra da Tijuca and thus contain exclusively upper-middle class condominiums. In this way a symbolic distinction finds its territorial expression in the administrative and geographic isolation of poor settlements, as the new project would be physically demarcated by a river and thus rendered nearly inaccessible for the inhabitants of the close-by settlements Canal do Anil and Gardenia Azul – the settlements, whose situation of confinement is the focus of the discussion of the next guise of informality.

To sum up: The signifier informality justifies intervention by the associations into urban planning against the backdrop of a perceived need to defend against both the uncontrolled actions of real estate developers and poor settlements. Such intervention, and its physical effect of separation, build on an accumulated material and social capital and thus reproduces social distinction.

Figure 1: Vila Panamericana



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**Map 1: Vila do Pan and Canal do Anil**

Source: Prefeitura Cidade de Rio – IPP (2016) [http://portalgeo.rio.rj.gov.br/ipp\\_viewer/](http://portalgeo.rio.rj.gov.br/ipp_viewer/)

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### 4.3 Informality and Resettlements

This last guise focuses on the use of informality as signifier to justify involuntary resettlements and subsequent social fractionalization. It then crosses to the other side of the river to specify several strategic appropriations of “informality” by the marginalized urban residents at the city’s edges.

#### 4.3.1 Social Fractionalization

19,000 inhabitants have been resettled in and around the city of Rio de Janeiro between 2008 and 2015, and another 40,000 are still under threat of resettlement. Resettlements

into social housing projects occur either from areas designated as being subject to the public interest, in private property, or from risk areas, that is, from areas that the *Secretaria de Habitação* (Housing Secretary, SH) defines as being in risk of flooding or harming the environment (Cardoso 2013, do Lago 2010). Legal instruments employed are, in the first case, exercise of eminent domain with compulsory acquisition and, in the latter, a participatory approach that compensates the individual household either financially, through rent subsidies for existing housing, or by providing new apartments in social housing complexes (Prefeitura 2013).<sup>4</sup>

The conflicts around involuntary resettlements in the area highlight the complexity that interlinks spatial confinement and the production of stateness. Due to its proximity to the Olympic Park that is currently being constructed in the area of Barra da Tijuca, the community Vila Autódromo has become a regularly cited example of mega-event induced resettlement. Founded in the 1960's by a small number of migrant families, Vila Autódromo was first threatened by a planned expansion of the Bus Rapid Transport (BRT) system in 2009. While 300 families have already accepted new residence in a nearby social housing project, there are still some 150 families resisting removal. Deploying a strategy of destabilization, the government officials demark those houses that will be removed by spraying the letters "SH" (Secretary of Housing) besides the entrance door. In many cases, the SH begins tearing down those indicated houses only partially, leaving them uninhabitable and with large holes in two of the walls. Moreover, as negotiations between community leaders and the SH occur on various levels, both collectively and individually, some families accept compensation packages while others want to hold out for a better offer – some are even excluded from negotiations due to a lack of sufficient property or personal documentation (Interview, Inalva, Inhabitant of Vila Autódromo, April 22, 2015). Although the community, together with urban planning experts from Rio de Janeiro's Institute for Urban and Regional Planning (IPPUR) has been developing an alternative plan (AMPVA 2013) that would have allowed both for the construction of the BRT and the willing families to stay in their homes, the SH still went ahead and destroyed the originally outlined buildings (Interview, Inalva, April 22, 2015). This evidence shows how struggles against informalization also motivate strong alliances. This alliance has been recognized not only by the media and among scholars, but has even been granted a prize by the Deutsche Bank – it thus speaks of the global connectedness of marginalized urban residents.

Nevertheless, the dividing a community's bargaining structures into resettled and resisting groups has become a common practice to destabilize political mobilization. The promise of social housing programs does produce both order and social instability.

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4 Online at: [rio.rj.gov.br/ebooks/legado\\_olimpico/](http://rio.rj.gov.br/ebooks/legado_olimpico/) (last access: 20.06.2016).

As a resettled inhabitant of a social housing project in Colonia Juliana Moreira claims: “It has been a dream of mine for years to escape informality” (May 26, 2015). By employing formality as a signifier for well-being, this inhabitant is clearly distinguishing her new lifestyle from the former community. Yet, for those who have either not proven legal tenure, or have insufficient income opportunities to pay back the monthly loan and the utility rates for gas, water and electricity, resettlement into a social housing project is not a viable option.

Such deliberate practice of involuntary resettlement in the Olympic City follows a logic of confinement. In the case of Vila Autódromo, resettlement is directed to social housing project “Parque Carioca”, which is located only two kilometers away from the original settlement. A profoundly different reality awaits the resettled: The architectonic arrangement of Parque Carioca, like many of the state social housing projects, favors fast access for police or other public entities, as well as the supervision of residents’ movements. It consists of 20 five-story apartment blocks, housing up to 500 families. Architectonic adjustments, including the construction modification of paths or public areas between subsections are forbidden. Technical administration teams are present on a daily basis to maintain the project’s infrastructure, such as fences, electricity, gas and other technical installations.

**Figure 2: Parque Carioca**



Source: (c) Frank Müller. All rights reserved. Used with permission.

In addition, social workers have been contracted for each of the 16 residential blocks. Their task is the organization of meetings with the neighbors and the establishment of close contact with the families. Such proximity, social worker Leila explains, “is helpful for us, as it keeps people in a good mood. In my case, but that is the exception, I have found a person to trust who helps me to remain informed about every movement, like newcomers, new partnerships, and so on.” (Interview, August 12, 2014.)

The architectonic arrangement of Parque Carioca, together with establishment of “trustworthy” community representatives help to increase the residents’ acceptance of their new living circumstances, as Leila goes on to explain. The positive perception of a profound state intervention into their lives is indeed a decisive factor for shaping everyday state-society relations: “In order to receive maintenance service for our apartments we first have to contact our representative, who then talks to the lady of the municipality, when she’s around!” (José, inhabitant, 27 May 2015).

In this intensified social interaction in the social housing projects, appropriate behavior is normalized, a process of distinction that can be drawn from a conversation with the local director of a primary school. For her, resettlement is the only plausible opportunity to save a child’s future: “We prefer to work with younger children. We can take some good influence on them. The older kids, they have lived in difficult circumstances for too long. They are already lost and we prefer not to waste our resources on them” (Interview, School Director, August 12, 2014.)

Resettlement-induced architectonic change and care practices go together with essentializing the impact of living in marginalized settlements on individual behavior. The success of these intertwined strategies, as the director expresses, is thus limited by structural conditions: Those who have lived in “unfavorable circumstances” will be less able to adapt (or “be adapted”) to the new environment. The director affirms a position of civility against which the *favela* environment breeds unforeseeable danger and limitations. Architectonic arrangements and social services in the social housing programs address inhabitants at a most intimate level of moral conduct, separating behavior into disturbing or satisfactory practices.

However, such moral-aesthetic othering also functions as an offer of symbolic capital. In a public hearing in the parliament of the State of Rio de Janeiro on May 26, delegate Paulo Ramos was asked to function as a mediator by different fractions of the community of Curicica. Regarding the community of Curicica, which is divided into those who aspire to resettlement and those who refuse to be removed, Ramos employed the signifier informality as being a status which “everyone can only want to overcome”

(Ramos 2015, translation by author). The construction of the BRT plays a decisive role in this narrative –on the one side, it has caused the resettlements of 186 families to a nearby MCMV project (Böll Stiftung 2015). On the other side, it is employed as a symbol of progress and development for the area and its inhabitants: “With the BRT in front of their new doors, it is hardly understandable for me that some see formalization of their livelihood as a menace” (Ramos 2015, n.p).

Such resettlements are a legal instrument that splits up communities and produces spatial confinement. Resettlement produces both order and social instability. On the one side it is, as a public attorney defending the “resistant” fraction at the same public hearing called it, an instrument for “urbanistic, social and aesthetic regularization” (Carvalho 2015, translation by author). This caters to the interests of those inhabitants who have declared their will to leave behind the precarious life in marginalized communities. Thus, informality differentiates urban actors not only between authorities and citizens. It is also a powerful category that divides communities internally: For those who either do not have sufficient proof of legal tenure, or who do not have income opportunities to pay back the monthly loan and the rates for gas, water and electricity, it is not a viable option.

Delegate Ramos’ narrative can thus be interpreted as a projection of an architectonic model that resembles upper-middle class gated condo-settlement, including pools and services for the urban poor. At the same time, as the division shows, the incarnation of the role as being informal and aspiring to participation in the urban modernization project of Rio de Janeiro also co-produces spatial confinement. In the interaction of the divided groups of the community, together with social workers and public authorities, informality accumulates power as it involves the urban poor into a process of urban modernization in which they contribute to the urban ordering.

#### 4.3.2 Strategic Appropriations

However, the differing projects for settlements at the city’s edge – between resettlement and resistance – also suggest that this last guise of informality is related to spatial confinement in another, even more socially fragmenting and legally precarious form.

Crossing the river and some 300 meters away from the gated community Vila Panamericana, the settlement Canal do Anil has been defined as an environmental risk area by the local government but has continued to grow, despite several attempts at eviction before and shortly after the Panamerican Games in 2007 (Solange, resident of Canal do Anil, Interview April 25, 2015). Facing the menace of eviction,



the residents' association (Associação de Moradores do Canal do Anil, AMCA) has agreed to a local planning document, including the area's subdivisions into individual plots in 2008 (Interview Bendito, resident of Canal do Anil, April 25, 2015). It was an attempt to define the settlement's "legal" growth by physically limiting its expansion. It demarcated an area of approximately two hectares and recognized the legal use of the land by 500 families. At the present, however, 2,000 families are inhabiting the plot (Interview Bendito). It is also the private property of Carvalho Hosken, the real estate consortium that also developed the nearby Vila Panamericana.

This plan did not automatically imply the formalization of land possessions, that is, inhabitants could not claim cadastral registration for their plots. According to the Brazilian City Statute of 2001 that "translated" the social function of property foreseen in the Brazilian Constitution of 1988 into national law (Lei n° 10.257/2001), a collective right to property is granted after five consecutive years for a low income group. The community plan recognizes the collective right as a whole and thus guarantees compensation in case of forced evictions for those individuals that signed its original version. Yet, after several modifications, legal security can only be granted by several other documents that prove the constant use by each singular household (photos, electricity bill, receipts for construction material, etc.). However, the local authorities of the *subprefeitura* acknowledged the AMCA as being in charge of issuing "*títulos de posse*", a property certificate and thus to maintain a registry of the distribution of the community's property. Here, the AMCA's property certificate gains some value for defending one's property. Such outsourcing of stateness for the registering land possession and its use obscures but does not remove the condition of legal instability for inhabitants as the settlement's demographic dynamic and growth demands increasing numbers of subdivisions and sales:

The only thing we can do is to collect everything that proves our land-use for several years. Yet, we know that if they want to remove us, the authorities will have a hard time to sue everyone due to each and everybody's different legal situation (Interview, Roberto,<sup>5</sup> April 25, 2015).

As explained to me by Roberto the resident of one of these areas, this practicing informality adds to a community defensive strategy. Some of the inhabitants hold titles of possession, some do not, others prove it with sale contracts with titleholders, and some do not. Such strategic legal instability may provide a chance to receive compensation in case of removal. In any case, individual families bargain for temporary

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5 Following the interviewees wishes. I have changed his name.

use with representative of the consortium, which range from allowances to use the terrain for farming, recycling trash and constructing dwellings.

Due to the lack of adequate jobs that would allow to pay the rising costs (loan and services), many “are not in the condition” (Interview, Roberto, April 25, 2015) to live in a MCMV project. They do not expect to find adequate conditions there, as resettlement into one of the MCMV apartments would leave no space left for constructing for future generations nor to carry out work that sustains a living (however precarious). In that sense, the practice of doing informality can be seen as one of strategic appropriation of a land-related socio-political status. Moreover, in making land fragmentation and property relations registered and transparent (for the sake of having to defend themselves against removal), such performance of informality is also a prosaic form of stateness. The institutionalized acting out of stateness, by issuing land titles, subcontracts and maintaining a community-specific public registry, cements the claims of inhabitants to belonging to a normative, albeit unstable order and projects a normative expectation directed at the formal system whose functioning they guarantee.

Nevertheless, such constant legal instability is an intense form of spatial confinement. Left with no other option than to prove one’s own conformity with informality tolerated by public authorities, or an inadequate living in a project with a restrictive architecture, the urban poor continue in marginalized conditions, despite or even due to a narrative of progress that promises geopolitical ascendance as site of the Olympic Games. Such tension is best expressed by community leader of Vila Autódromo:

We have shown all what we could to collaborate with the government, agreed to territorial limitations and partial removals. But the fact that the few families and their shacks are not accepted not even there where they do not disturb progress makes us second class citizens (Interview, Inalva Brites, April 22, 2015).

Figure 3: Vila Autódromo



Text: “We are not fools. We know who is in the fight and who is behind the money” (translated by the author).

Source: (C) Frank Müller. All rights reserved. Used with permission.

Thus, this guise of informality shows how a formal urbanization is both a vehicle of contestation and defense and a governing tool to maintain a legal instability. Claiming to define the limits of ordered urban development visibilizes the contingency upon which the concrete characteristics of this order are established – thus rendering apparent that signifying “informality” as a threat is merely a particularistic appropriation and thus a hegemonic operator to govern the urban poor.

## 5. Conclusions

This paper has argued that spatial confinement should not be understood as a linear but rather as a politically contested process in which informality occupies a critical place. While Rio's current transformation is excluding and leading to further marginalization, at the same time such structurally and historically established othering is also undergoing contestation, leading to alliances and political emancipation. Moreover, social distinction and stigmatization are not only occurring between but also among social classes. These insights allow for the argument to come full circle. The paper asked whose interests the urban crisis benefits. While one may be tempted to answer that real estate developers, landowners and urban middle class homeowners form a powerful coalition that is expanding spaces of exclusive residency and consumerism, the picture becomes more nuanced if one conceives of informality as a performed role.

The paper argues that the urban crisis is actually best understood as a crisis of the signifier informality, and provided support for this argument with the events that are playing out on the stage of Olympic City-branding. Rio de Janeiro, whose growth rates have decreased significantly, is no longer characterized by uncontrolled expansion, but rather by internal conflicts. These land conflicts are fought out on the backdrop of a discourse of modernization and a narrative of a progress-threatening informality which in turn justifies the spatial confinement of the urban poor. In this paper, confinement has been developed as a category to investigate this aspect of the performance of informality. Conceived in its relational entanglements, the socially disparaging binary formality-informality persists in variegated, coexisting, simultaneous processes of destabilization, stigmatization, and marginalization.

Rio's conflictive western area evinces a controlled instability. Here, spatial confinement perpetuates the legal limbo and the unsecure social and architectonic status of settlements of the urban poor. These precarious spaces of social, legislative and technical instability are not opposed to the state nor disconnected from the global economy, but are rather sites where stateness and global aspirations are in a permanent state of becoming. In this area, the state performs its weakness quite cleverly (Randeria 2002), as it partially confers the tasks of socio-spatial reordering to private actors.

Informality is an effective signifier to justify resettlement, and no longer solely ascribed to settlements of the poor. The imposition of an urban progress becomes clearly visible in the architecture and social control cemented in the federal MCMV projects. Its projected modernity promises a similar urban architecture for the urban poor as for the rich in condominiums, framing the living in a serviced apartment building as

an opportunity of belonging to the imaginary of progress and globality. While for some recipients this is a viable alternative and a welcomed solution to their former precarious livelihood, others oppose to this lifestyle, seeing it as a loss of community values and personal opportunities. Therefore, resettlements destabilize the political, social and economic fabric of marginalized communities, and the narrative of informality as a threat perpetuates historically established structures of marginalization.

As such an investment attractive area, the western expansion of Rio showcases global city aspirations and provides a stage for political struggles between heterogeneous claims and actors: Central to Rio de Janeiro's Olympic City framing and thus to a solution to the urban crisis, the venue of this stage justifies real estate developers' claim to provide ordered urban development. At the same time, such growing international attention also visibilizes and effectively shapes the claims of the urban poor, in the ways discussed here. Instead of being disconnected, the urban poor are both others in relation to which real estate developers, as well as homeowner associations accumulate social and symbolic capital, and political subjects that effectively articulate resistance to the hegemonic order. However, informality is also a strategically appropriated role and resulting in social distinction within one social class as well as across classes. The paradox of both performing informality and expecting the belonging to a normative order internal to marginalized settlements seems to be on the agenda also of the urban poor. These groups, far from being a disconnected homogeneous class of the dispossessed, thus also aspire and affirm stateness as a substantive principle and connect to a global order of inter-city competition and its inherent practices of spatial confinement.

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