

# WORKING PAPERS

## Immigrants and Cities: Conceptualizing Urban Informality Within Planetary Urbanization

**Dominik T. Formanowicz**  
Working Paper No. 2021/10  
August 2021



The *Working Papers* Series is produced jointly by the  
Ryerson Centre for Immigration and Settlement (RCIS)  
and the CERC in Migration and Integration

[www.ryerson.ca/rcis](http://www.ryerson.ca/rcis)  
[www.ryerson.ca/cerc-migration](http://www.ryerson.ca/cerc-migration)

Ryerson  
University

Canada Excellence  
Research Chair in  
Migration & Integration



RYERSON CENTRE  
for Immigration and Settlement

**Working Paper**

No. 2021/10

**Immigrants and Cities:  
Conceptualizing Urban Informality Within Planetary Urbanization**

Dominik T. Formanowicz  
*York University*

Series Editors: Anna Triandafyllidou and Usha George



The *Working Papers* Series is produced jointly by the Ryerson Centre for Immigration and Settlement (RCIS) and the CERC in Migration and Integration at Ryerson University.

*Working Papers* present scholarly research of all disciplines on issues related to immigration and settlement. The purpose is to stimulate discussion and collect feedback. The views expressed by the author(s) do not necessarily reflect those of the RCIS or the CERC.

For further information, visit [www.ryerson.ca/rcis](http://www.ryerson.ca/rcis) and [www.ryerson.ca/cerc-migration](http://www.ryerson.ca/cerc-migration).

ISSN: 1929-9915



Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 2.5  
Canada License

## **Abstract**

Brenner and Schmid's planetary urbanization theory has been a very ambitious attempt to bridge the global scale of socio-economic processes with urbanization, a force constitutive to shaping societies across different geographies. Drawing on Lefebvre's idea of the urban and on his notion of the production of space, planetary urbanization introduces a spatial ontology that is both elegant and very abstract. Too abstract, the critics say, calling for a more nuanced approach to difference and resistance, for including the gender dimension or for incorporating the view from the Global South. Some of the authors point out that migration, one of the forces driving urban change, is also omitted in the work of Brenner and Schmid. This paper attempts to bridge this gap by conceptualizing transnational migration from the Global South to the Global North onto the grid of planetary urbanization. By focusing on transnationalism, it addresses some of the shortcomings while, at the same time, "testing" the theory's applicability to population movements. To situate migration into socio-economic relations, this paper uses the notion of informality, differentiating between its usage in the North and the South, arguing that informality, if perceived as a mode of space production, could fill the gaps in the abstract landscape of planetary urbanization. The paper also calls for situating the theory at a feasible scale of analysis to allow empirical contribution. Such a scale, in the case of transnational migration, could be a scale of a neighbourhood.

**Table of contents**

Abstract .....	i
Introduction .....	1
Space Production of the Urban .....	2
Planetary Urbanization and Its Criticisms.....	3
Conceptualizing Informality.....	5
Spatiality of a Neighbourhood .....	6
Migrants' Informality in the North.....	7
Conclusions.....	8
References.....	10

## Introduction

Urban spaces are characterized by a plethora of processes, constantly intertwining with each other, reshaping not only what we perceive as cities but impacting socio-economic make-up on the planetary scale. To grasp the interconnectedness and relationality of urban processes involving migrants, both powerful, overarching theories are needed as well as a nuanced empirical calibration of the scales of analysis.

The process of immigrants from the Global South settling in the cities of the North is one of such empirical openings for understanding the fuzzy character of urbanization processes. Migrants, born into particular socio-spatial arrangements, find themselves in totally different spaces constructed by unfamiliar rules, forced to re-learn the world around them and to negotiate their presence within it. Often, this process takes place in informal settings of housing, labour and learning itself, relying on information flows of densely populated city streets and high-rise buildings (Bateman, 2014; Saunders, 2011; Zahirovic, 2007).

There is a long tradition of conceptualizing transnational migration (De Hass, 2019; Samers & Collyer, 2016) and the role of informal arrangements in negotiating individual and collective spaces (AlSayyad, 2004; Rigg, 2007; Roy, 2005, 2009a, 2009b, 2016). Yet, the notion of informality has been employed in so many theoretical contexts over the years that it seems to have lost its semantic coherence and conceptual potential to explain urban realities. Some argue for departure from informality (Streule, 2020) into new epistemological taxonomies whereas others call for revisiting the notion beyond its surface-level, everyday use to revive its encompassing, nuanced relationality (Devlin, 2018).

The main argument of this article is that informality might still be a useful notion for describing immigrant experiences of settlement from the Global South to the North. For the purposes of this article, Ananya Roy's description of informality is employed, conceptualizing informality as a mode of space production, "defined by a territorial logic of deregulation" (Roy, 2009a, p. 8). According to Roy, informality needs to be perceived as a deep interconnectedness of social, economic and political factors, with formal and informal constituting each other – not outside of state interventions but within them (Roy, 2005, 2009a, 2009b). From that point of view, informality is not merely a sector of economy but a mode of creating, co-creating and re-creating spaces, "a series of transactions that connect different economies and spaces to one another" (Roy, 2005, p.148). It constitutes "the rules of the game" (AlSayyad & Roy, 2003, p.17), determining the nature of transactions between individuals, individuals and institutions and within institutions as well.

If informality is a spatial process, conceptualizing it requires an ontology of space. The one suggested here draws from Lefebvre's (1991) understanding of space as a social construct, created by social interactions. Such a stance allows to accommodate informality as the mode of interaction withing the socially constructed space. Secondly, geographic perspective needs to be introduced, conceptualizing the North and South and their intertwined nature. This article suggests planetary urbanization (Brenner & Schmid, 2015) as a feasible, open-ended description of the North-South economic, social and urban dynamics. Lefebvre's ontology, projected by Brenner and Schmid onto the planetary grid, is an open-ended concept, another point of departure which requires addressing various gaps (Parnell & Pieterse, 2015; Peake, 2016; Robinson, 2016; Ruddick, 2018; Simone, 2016) and zooming into a particular scale to retain its empirical utility.

There are two salient reasons for utilizing planetary urbanization. First, it builds on Lefebvre's ontology, thus it provides a certain conceptual coherence of ideas from the start. Secondly, it intends to describe global processes and dynamics of the space production even if its grand scale is also its biggest limit. Such a global perspective is a useful "entry point" before delving into more focused deliberations. To achieve any level of empirical feasibility, global population movements need to be researched on a particular scale. The "global scale" is simply too broad and vague to keep focus on a process as diverse as human movement and settlement

in any qualitative manner. That is why the proposed scale for possible empirical research is the one of an urban neighbourhood (Appadurai, 1995; Saunders, 2011; Streule, 2020), suggested as feasible in conceptualizing urban informality, providing some general homogeneity of spatial experience of migrants and still, allowing for the effects of everyday negotiations of space to remain salient.

This article outlines all those concepts aiming at tracking both, the apparent coherences, and the gaps to fill. It aims at providing an overview and explaining the connections between the theories of informality, of space and of urbanization, situating human mobility across those three. Its ambition is not to provide fixed solutions or outline possible research questions but to suggest theoretical frameworks of understanding the mobility between South and North and its consequences for urbanization.

In the following parts, the theory of space and “the urban” will be outlined. Next, its dialectics will be presented within the framework of planetary urbanization. Only then, it is possible to refocus on conceptualizing informality as a mode of space production and to position it on the scale of a migrant neighbourhood. Finally, different approaches to informality between the South and North (Devlin, 2018) would be discussed to highlight the necessity of “views from the South” (Parnell & Pieterse, 2015) in order to show the permeability of experience, both epistemological and the one lived and utilized by migrants.

## **Space Production of the Urban**

What is urban? What creates the difference between urban and, perhaps, rural? Do such differences even exist, are they still valid and if yes, what is the ontological gravity of upholding them? To grasp the relationality of informality contextualized in an urban space, not only the notion of urban needs to be explained but also the idea of space. Is it static and given, or perhaps it is relational too, created, re-created and co-created by a plethora of simultaneous factors?

In a contemporary context, such questions cannot be answered without evoking Henri Lefebvre, a French philosopher, whose work stems from a Marxist perspective but transcends the classic Hegelian and Marxist dialectical thinking by introducing the ontological triads, understood by Lefebvre as a further development of the former (Schmid, 2008, p. 33). His idea of the production of space is probably the most powerful, overarching and influential of his triads, however “thinking in threes” is simply the foundation of Lefebvre’s conceptualizations, a “general principle applied by Lefebvre to very different fields” (p. 34).

Lefebvre famously argues that social space is a social product (1991). Emphasizing the role of production in a Marxist manner, Lefebvre acknowledges that space is not simply a preconceived “emptiness,” filled with objects and movement. It is actively produced by interplay and relations of ideas, spatial manifestations, and experiences. Although hard to grasp intuitively, production of space is not intended to be a metaphor or a lapse ‘into mysticism’ (Schmid, 2008, p. 36). On the contrary, the theory of space is an effort to introduce a universal modality of just three overarching elements which would encompass the totality of spatial occurrences. These are: the perceived, the lived and the conceived dimensions of space.

The perceived space is the one most embedded in the materiality of space. It comprises all the elements which can be seen, felt, and experienced by the sensuality of the body (p. 39). The role of the perceived is to convey patterns, to facilitate reproduction, which results in flows, in routes and networks (Merrifield, 2000). In result, it could be compared to the built environment (Harvey, 1978). It intermediates the remaining spaces.

The lived space is the one of experience. “It may be directional, situational or relational, because it is essentially qualitative, fluid and dynamic” (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 42). The lived spaces define the world as it is experienced by people in their everyday lives. It cannot be fully theorized

– there is always a substantial “surplus” which can only be expressed by artistic activity (Schmid, 2008, p. 40).

The conceived space is the space of embodied ideas, of a vision. Lefebvre (1991) calls it the one of planners, of designers, ‘technocrats’ (p. 38). It is reflected in maps, plans, schemes, policy papers and other forms of ordering, explaining and describing. It is the one created by ideas and conveyed by institutions (p. 10). Merrifield (2000) calls it repressive, because, particularly under capitalism, it tends to dominate other spaces, impose its hegemony (p. 176).

What is urban then and how is it related to the production of space?

According to Ruddick et al. (2018), for Lefebvre it was related to the modernity of an industrialized city, which was in crisis and needed to be dismantled, replaced with ‘complete urbanization’ (p. 389). Urbanization was the primary engine of capitalism, already more important and pervasive than industrialization, resulting in an ‘urban society,’ reshaping space and landscapes, reaching into hinterlands (Brenner, 2014). Thus, urban seems to be an equivalent of the urban society, not the city as we understand it. It was also a potentiality for an urban revolution, a force transcending the industrialized society (Schmid, 2018).

Moreover, urban meant to be a ‘level’ of social relations, mediating between the sphere of capital and the state and the private level (Lefebvre, 2003 [1970]; Schmid, 2018). In such a distinction, another of Lefebvre’s triad can be found, resonating with the urban as a social practice, the vision of state and capital shaping the conceived spaces and the private resembling the lived space. Still, they are not fully interchangeable – they can be understood as different manifestations of the process of space production.

What constitutes the urban are: centrality (the material production), mediation (representation and regulation) and difference (human experience) – yet another triad. What is crucial in such conceptualization of the urban, not even opposing but disassociated with just “the city”, is its open-ended potentiality. In other words, urbanization as an unbound spatial occurrence, a phase of society’s development, creates openings for further theoretical analyses, on different scales. A particularly interesting one, both for conceptualizing the urban but also informality, is planetary urbanization – along with its constructive critiques.

## **Planetary Urbanization and Its Criticisms**

Ruddick et al. (2018) argue that 1970s were the era of contemporary geography of urbanization emerging, “propelling the world into the ‘Urban Age’” (p. 389). Its conceptualizations were largely influenced by the aforementioned writings of Lefebvre and the idea of ‘complete urbanization.’

Brenner and Schmid (2015) have reengaged that concept 30 years later, in the midst of the financial crisis of 2008. However, the authors notice a different crisis – the one of urban epistemology, calling for a radical rethinking of the method as well as the categories and cartographies of understanding the urban life (p. 151). By outlining the main premises of the emerging open-ended concept, the ontological boundaries of a new boundaryless urbanization are set. Resembling Lefebvre’s ontology, it is argued that urban is a theoretical category, not an empirical one. It is also a process, not a bounded universal form, which speaks to the first argument. Urbanization is constituted by three mutually interconnected ‘moments’: concentrated urbanization, extended urbanization and differential urbanization (p. 166). The first two moments exist in a relational dialectics, mutually constitutive, entailing “operationalization of places, territories and landscapes, often located far beyond the dense population centers, to support the everyday activities and socioeconomic dynamics of urban life” (p. 167). Extended urbanization moment also includes routes of transportation and communication and enclosures of space for the sake of further ‘development’ so, in that sense, it touches upon the violence of dispossession and capitalist accumulation. Differential urbanization is the mode which links the first two with a

dialectic 'response' where "inherited sociospatial configurations are continually creatively destroyed" (p. 168), intrinsically related to dynamics and tendencies of the capitalist order which manifests the potential for new arrangements, induced by the 'implosion-explosion' metaphor. These moments constitute 'dimensions' of urbanization, namely "spatial practices, territorial regulation and everyday life" (p. 171).

Brenner and Schmid (2015) describe these processes as planetary – there is no 'outside' to them. That stems from the proliferation of economic governance, deregulation of financial processes and flows, "flexibilization" (p. 172) of global production networks and production itself, reflecting the era of globalization as often conceptualized in the last 30 years (Castells, 2011; Hardt & Negri, 2000; Herod, 2017; Hickel, 2017). Still, urbanization is capitalist in character with uneven spatial development as its intrinsic feature), leading to "differentiations and polarizations that have long been both precondition and product of the urbanization process under capitalism" (Smith, 2010, p. 176). In that sense, although urbanization is planetary it is uneven. It affects and re-creates all spaces, but it does not entail any kind of symmetric 'development' of those spaces – the opposite is actually true.

The last element of Brenner's and Schmid's conceptualization is the collectiveness of the process, opening possibilities of contestation and praxis of difference. Yet, ironically, that is where many scholars find the openings for contesting the novel theory itself.

Ruddick et al. (2018) point out to the fact that in Brenner's and Schmid's formulation it is almost impossible to "locate either subjects or the process of subjectivation" and that the project erases the "embodied and embedded" ontological struggles (p. 396). Ruddick et al., (2018) blame it on the occlusion of praxis and a lack of interest in situating planetary urbanization in any particular context. That also speaks to the criticisms of "urbanization of everything" by Ananya Roy (2016). Moreover, Ruddick et al. (2018) notice a striking 'blindness' to the role of migration as a constitutive force in urbanization processes, potentially creating spaces of difference. According to Ruddick et al. (2018), in a stance that will inform the following parts of this text, difference does not need to be merely acknowledged but also recognized and urban theory needs not only to engage but also emerge from understanding difference (p. 399).

Drawing on this idea, multiple possible directions emerge. "Blackness" as a construct is one possible theoretical lens (Simone, 2015) whereas Peake (2016) considers more focus on women in adjusting urban theory. Parnell and Pieterse (2015) call for including a view from the South. Especially the latter point out to the fact that "most Southern urban realities [are] characterized by economic informality, multiplicity, marginality and dispersion, not agglomeration" (p. 185). Drawing examples from the African continent, they recognize the specificity of urbanization processes there and the impossibility of creating a global urban theory without Africa." That speaks to a decade older argument of Roy (2005) of the "inappropriateness of Euro-American ideas for Third World cities" (p. 147).

It can be argued that planetary urbanization is still a useful framework for contextualizing Lefebvre's urban and production of space into contemporary urban realities. It provides a conceptual platform however; it does not situate difference in any useful context. This needs to be done independently.

Ruddick points out to the omission of migration as a possible space of difference. Parnell and Pieterse mention informal realities of urban arrangements of the Global South. However, there is an additional dimension, bridging these two, namely migration from the South to the North. This can be seen as facilitated by concentrated urbanization, engaging extended urbanization and becoming one of the inevitable outcomes of this dialectics. Then, through the dimension of differential urbanization, migrants constitute difference in urban realities of the North. If not by an active, deliberate formulation of differential spaces (social movements, resistance to exploitation), it might take place as a perpetuation of socio-spatial arrangements derived from home realities. Informality mentioned by Parnell and Pieterse and Ananya Roy, might be a useful framework of understanding these socio-spatial arrangements.



## Conceptualizing Informality

Informality, particularly urban informality, has a long history as a concept, reaching back to 1970s (Streule, 2020). It has changed through decades, has been reified, reinvented, and rejected – to the point when different scholars might take different meanings for granted in a process resulting in inconclusive discussions. Thus, introducing informality and delineating its conceptual boundaries are indispensable steps for further deliberations.

Historically, it has been used to describe the conditions of the immigrants working on the streets in poor and precarious environments. Such an understanding of informality was very binary, as juxtaposed with the formal, secure jobs in a highly regulated economy. Over time, its use spread from solely labor analysis to housing and other dimensions of urban life, but the dichotomy of formal-informal persisted. This dichotomy resulted in perceiving informality as a marginal occurrence. Critics pointed out the actual dynamisms of informal relationality and its applicability in different dimensions of the society, calling for re-conceptualization. It was the post-colonial scholars who reclaimed informality in a radical way, as “an attempt to disrupt hegemonic ways of thinking, knowing and doing by emphasizing diversity, plurality, complexity and fluidity, and called for attention to differentiations within informality” (Streule, 2020, p. 5). Ananya Roy famously called it an idiom of urbanization (2005) and the notion became increasingly enmeshed into different spectrums, not simple binaries. When analysing informality on the legality-illegality spectrum, new approaches acknowledged it often being perpetuated by state actors (Roy, 2006). Another strain of analysis evolved around political representation and informality seen as a possibility of everyday resistance (Castells, 1983).

Roy conceptualizes informality as a mode of space production, “defined by a territorial logic of deregulation” (Roy, 2009a, p. 8). It constitutes “the rules of the game” (AISayyad & Roy, 2003, p. 17), determining the nature of transactions between individuals, individuals and institutions and within institutions as well.

Formality “fixes the spatial value” and maps it whereas informality negotiates that spatial value and “unmaps” space (AISayyad & Roy, p. 17). That point of view is particularly interesting in conceptualizing the arrival of transnational migrants into the cities of the North, where the materiality of space is largely already settled. It is not constituted by informality to the same extent as, for instance, in the “built overnight” outskirts of the cities in the South (Dasgupta, 2014; Mehta, 2009; Sounders, 2011; Streule, 2020). Thus, urban informality exercised by the migrants is confined more to the everyday practice – not determining (as in the early definitions of informality as a separate sector) but negotiating; not mapping but un-mapping and re-mapping.

Also, urban informality is not a “way of life,” it is not coherent either. Differences can be found within informality too, marking off diverse types of accumulation and politics. Particularly in capitalist spaces negotiated by migrants, some of these types are deepened and others annihilated (p. 18), rendering informality not only as an adaptable and everchanging logic.

Roy brings up an important question – the issue of planning. Particularly, in the South, planning is enmeshed in informality, designating some activities as authorised and others as not, often along the lines of power and capital. Yiftachel (2006) calls this the stratification of informalities, ‘whitening’ some and ‘blackening’ other spatial processes. In result, planning “produces the unplannable” – informality as a state of exception from the formal order of urbanization (Roy, 2005, p. 147). Such approach aligns with Brenner’s and Schmid’s differential urbanization described before, where “socio-spatial configurations are continually creatively destroyed” (Brenner & Schmid, 2015, p. 168), related to dynamics and tendencies of the capitalist order. That way, conceptualizing urban informality “as an organizing logic” (AISayyad & Roy, 2003, p. 18), “a system of norms that governs the process of urban transformation itself” (Roy, 2005, p. 148) fills the scaffolding of concentrated, extended and differential urbanization with the content of everyday life, allowing this paper to move on from the conceptual to the spatial.

## Spatiality of a Neighbourhood

Monika Streule (2020) argues that urban informality is still too broad of a concept to retain its utility for describing urbanization processes (p. 5). She blames that on a couple of factors, namely its one-dimension character (always being the derivative of regulation), the lack of focus on social composition (class and income), the absence of insight into the individual/collective spectrum nor into the degree to which processes are commodified or self-organized.

These reservations are valid however, some of them could be applicable to almost any abstract, overarching concept. To formulate a response, urban informality does not need to be rejected as such – it simply needs a spatial zoom into a chosen unit where elements pointed out by Streule become salient and tangible.

Paradoxically, “city” is not that useful, being more of an outcome of the process of urbanization, defined as material transformations, regulation of the territory and social experiences (Streule, 2020, p. 8) than a unit of analysis. What else, then? A city district? Administrative units often entail artificial delineations, reflecting the history of planning and capital in a particular city more than any particular social make up. A house, a street? These can provide valuable insight for intimate, anthropological research but would be too deep of a “dive” from the macro level theory of planetary urbanization.

Urban geography has a successful record operating on a scale of neighbourhoods (Jacobs, 2016; Zukin, 1989). In fact, that scale is often shared with migration studies, just to recall important works of Peggy Levitt (2001), conceptualizing trans-locality and social remittances, as “ideas, practices and know-how, circulating between migrants and non-migrants” (Samers & Collyer, 2017, p. 94). Such locality is a “phenomenological quality, which expresses itself in certain kinds of agency, sociality and reproducibility” (Appadurai, 1995, p. 208).

Stemming from that sense of locality, Appadurai describes a neighbourhood as situated community, a definable social form, where actuality and spatial potential for social reproduction are manifested (p. 208). He sees them as relational and contextual: “That is, neighbourhoods are inherently what they are because they are opposed to something else and derive from other, already produced neighbourhoods” (p. 212). What is particularly important in the context of migrant destination areas, Appadurai’s definition does not restrict spatial forms to entities historically “unselfconscious” and ethnically homogeneous. The author calls them ‘ethnoscapes’ – neighbourhoods entailing “ethnic projects of others” and the consciousness of such projects, characterised by a recognized general logic which accommodates recognizable social life-worlds. “Such knowledge can be encoded in the pragmatics of rituals (...) which always carry an implicit sense of the teleology of locality-building” (p. 212). On such defined scale of a neighbourhood there is room for urban informality, often derived from homelands in different parts of the planet, providing such pragmatics of rituals, “system of norms governing urban transformation” as described by Roy.

Streule, although officially parting with informality, also uses neighbourhoods as a unit for empirical research of popular urbanization, providing examples of Mexico City, Lagos, Kolkata and Istanbul (2020). Streule outlines popular urbanization, borrowed from Mexican and Latin American conceptualizations of *urbanización popular*. In her study terms differ across spaces, including a developmentalist idea of “slums” but also geographically-specific *gecekondu* or favelas however, they all describe low-income areas characterised by some degree of self-organization and collectivity.

Popular urbanization, historically and contemporarily, designates the self-production of neighbourhoods by its inhabitants (p. 6). With the examples of city areas “built overnight” (p. 4), popular urbanization delivers deep case-study insight into urbanization, however the story is being told through the narrative of material transformation which determines the other two dialectic elements of urbanization, territorial regulation and social experiences of the everyday.

It is important to emphasize that such a description cannot be fully applicable to the cities of the Global North, where immigrant neighbourhoods are being created within the existing material conditions of cities and strong territorial regulation, but still, actively being reshaped by social experiences. Such difference in accentuating what is possible shapes the role of urban informality, reducing it from this grand mode of creating the materiality of a city into a more nuanced, but still crucial, mode of negotiating spaces.

### **Migrants' Informality in the North**

Devlin (2018), building on the work of Yiftachel (2006), argues that informality is a relevant tool for conceptualizing spaces of immigrant settlement in the Global North. Devlin (2018) points out to the fact that “increasing convergence” between North and South in experiences of urban poverty, exclusion and inequality call for attention. The “frustration with [the] existing toolkit” (p. 18) brings him to the critique of the scarcity of conceptual arrangements regarding informality in the North. Devlin (2018), quite sarcastically, groups the approaches to informality in the North into three groups. Everyday Urbanism is the one of urban designers and city planners, reducing urbanization to “concerns with authenticity and vague notions of an organic urbanism” (p. 12). Tactical Urbanism is the narrative a priori opposed to the state and capital, exemplified by Airbnb and other tech-based companies reshaping urban spaces. The third approach is DIY Urbanism, concerned with residents building the city bottom-up. Drawing on Lefebvre on the surface, it focuses exclusively on use value, ignoring the exchange value, shunning the pragmatic role of informality and always focused on the ideological.

As easily observed, in such delineation there are not many tools for conceptualizing migrant neighbourhoods. Devlin comes up with a distinction between informality of need and one of desire. Both are unfortunately intrinsically linked with the spectrum of legality as a point of reference and both stem from a simplistic, positivist ontology, resembling concepts of push and pull factors in migration studies (De Haas, Miller, Castles, 2019; Samers & Collyer, 2017). These are binary and rigid tools, confining rather than giving room for nuanced exploration and entirely ignoring the complexity of human experience.

Thus, quite reasonably, Devlin (2018) calls for utilizing the multiplicity of theories conceptualized in the Global South, arguing that Southern cities could become sites of theory origin with North becoming its recipient, for a change (p. 18). Devlin (2018) claims can be interpreted as speaking to AlSayyad's and Roy's call for “transnational interrogation, which is the idea of using one context to ask questions of another” (p. 15).

From these perspectives, theory aligns with the migration act itself - originating in the South, reshaping the cities of the North, and bringing the question back to the role of informality in migrant neighbourhoods of arrival. Examples have always been there. Doug Saunders, a Canadian journalist, has done a remarkable investigative work bringing empirical examples of migrants' informality-immersed realities, calling the neighbourhoods “arrival cities.” Not academic and serving a rather salient economic agenda, his book is still a highly relevant empirical evidence of urban informality in the Global North. One of the examples it provides is Thorncliffe Park, an area in Toronto consisting of “high-rise apartments are private-sector rental units, with no possibility of being purchased by their occupants” (p. 161). Similar landscapes are observed in St. James Town, Toronto (Bateman, 2014), Bijlmermeer in Amsterdam (Zahirovic, 2007) and many others. Yet, informal arrangements are at work: “Neighborhood Office, (..) is [Thorncliffe's] self-government institution, a busy facility that provides a wide range of services for poor migrants” (Saunders, 2011, p. 161). With high population density, it allows the quick spread of information about available jobs and affordable housing, provided not by the municipality but by the community. Corner200 and Corner240, two resident-run community centres, play a similar role in St. James Town, Toronto. Even the naming, utilizing the word “corner,” shows how the lived

experience of informal gathering, utilizing spaces of visibility and interaction such as corridors, ad hoc arranged plazas and street corners, produce not only the spatial practice of residents, but paves its way to the conceived space of publicly recognized institutions such as community centres (Murray, 2020). As far as Corner 200 provides accommodation and settlement assistance, Corner240, comprising of skilled community members, specializes in fixing everything from bikes to home equipment and computers – all free of charge, free of registration, based on the act of showing up and asking for help.

Examples from Europe also show how migrants produce spaces out of the necessity of the everyday, “bending the city to their needs” (Devlin, 2018, p. 4). When mostly Surinamese migrants inhabited the hostile, peripheral modernist estate of Bijlmermeer (Zahirovic, 2007), the lack of commons drew residents to utilize garages as places of doing business, both legal and illicit. Also, quite famously, garages were used as churches, transcending the hostility of modernist arrangements, creating new conceived spaces of worship and profoundly reshaping the meaning of spatial practices.

Everyday arrangements do not only confine to a neighbourhood’s territorially, but a neighbourhood as a community transcends them as in Devlin’s example of food vending practices in Red Hook Park in New York. Residents of the nearby Red Hook Houses project created a food court for outside visitors who come to the park on weekends. This vending spot drew attention to predominantly white communities looking for new, “alternative” food experiences across the city. That led to clampdown on vending practices, previously ignored by the municipality (Devlin, 2018).

The most recent although perhaps far-fetched example of informal space production transcending bounded territoriality would be the case of Tiny Shelters in Toronto. Designed to provide alternative to crowded homeless shelters, small wooden structures spread across the city in the winter season. The topic of unhoused people in Toronto exceeds the immigration debate, however, with over 40% of Toronto homeless registered as refugees and asylum seekers (CBC, 2019), impacted communities of migrants and unhoused Canadians largely overlap. Toronto’s official inquiry against Tiny Shelters speaks to Roy’s point that “informality must be understood not as the object of state regulation but rather as produced by the state itself” (Roy, 2005, p. 149).

## **Conclusions**

Bringing back Roy’s arguments, this paper makes a full circle, highlighting its main point – informality seen as mode of space production is a relevant and adequate tool of conceptualizing immigrant neighbourhoods in the Global North. Perceived as such a mode, urban informality can bridge the overarching premises of macro-scale theories such as planetary urbanization with empirical evidence based on everyday lives of immigrants. Yet, if not scaled properly, it becomes vague and abstract, losing its momentum. Thus, the unit of analysis, its spatiality and relationality, is crucial for the effects of informal arrangements to become salient in the complex realities of migrants’ arrival. That entails considering not only the bounded territoriality of official neighbourhoods but also its interactions with cities as a whole as well as migrants’ transnational ties and everyday practices.

Henri Lefebvre’s (1991) production of space theory is as brilliant as elusive, despite authors adamant insistence on its materiality. Without proper training and ongoing reiteration of meanings it is hard to grasp in the world raised and defined by Euclidian imagination of space. That makes large-scale ontologies such as planetary urbanization worth attention – not as an end product but as an opening “towards new epistemologies.” Critics are right pointing out the lack of inclusion of migration as a planetary force and the absence of perspectives from the South, but that is exactly what consecutive iterations of conceptual frameworks should provide. At the same time, proliferation of new concepts, stemming from a new theory is not necessarily the way

forward. Informality, historically quite embattled and always requiring conceptual scrutiny, stands as a useful notion, especially refined by nuanced epistemologies, such as Roy's. It is also true that conceptualized in the spaces of the Global South, it informs urbanization processes through spatial materiality, governance and experience at the same time, making the process clearly visible. It plays a different role in the North, where - if used to describe the everyday experience of transnational migrants – it needs to be contextualized carefully within the web of interactions between what is brought to a new place and what is found there. The processes of negotiation often entail ascribing new meanings and redefining spatial practices by the lived experience of the everyday. Taking into consideration the politicised presence of migrants in the Global North and the inequality of power between citizens and newcomers, structures procured by urban informality are usually threaded carefully and unobtrusively. Thus, conceptualizing them requires an adequate spatial focus and a flexible toolkit, as well as a watchful observer.

## References

- AlSayyad, N., & Roy, A. (Eds.). (2003). *Urban Informality: Transnational Perspectives from the Middle East, Latin America, and South Asia*. Lexington Books.
- Appadurai, A. (1995). The production of locality. *Counterworks: Managing the diversity of knowledge*, 204-225.
- Bateman, C. (2014, April 26). *St. James Town and the messy politics of urban renewal*. BlogTO. Retrieved from: [https://www.blogto.com/city/2014/04/st\\_james\\_town\\_and\\_the\\_messy\\_politics\\_of\\_urban\\_renewal/](https://www.blogto.com/city/2014/04/st_james_town_and_the_messy_politics_of_urban_renewal/)
- Brenner, N., & Schmid, C. (2015). Towards a new epistemology of the urban?. *City*, 19(2-3), 151-182.
- Brenner, N., ed. (2014). *Implosions/Explosions: Towards a Study of Planetary Urbanization*. Berlin: Jovis.
- Castells, M. (1983). *The city and the grassroots: A cross-cultural theory of urban social movements* (No. 7). Univ of California Press.
- Castells, M. (2011). *The rise of the network society* (Vol. 12). John Wiley & Sons.
- Cori (2018, April 10). *The story of Toronto's St. James Town*. Retrieved from: <https://remoteswap.club/story-st-james-town/>
- Dasgupta, R. (2014). *Capital: The Eruption of Delhi*. Penguin.
- De Haas, H., Miller, M. J., & Castles, S. (2019). *The age of migration: International population movements in the modern world*. Red Globe Press.
- Devlin, R. T. (2019). A focus on needs: toward a more nuanced understanding of inequality and urban informality in the global North. *Journal of Cultural Geography*, 36(2), 121-143.
- Hardt, M., & Negri, A. (2000). *Empire*. Harvard University Press.
- Herod, A. (2017). *Labor*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Hickel, J. (2017). *The divide: A brief guide to global inequality and its solutions*. Random House.
- Jacobs, J. (2016). *The death and life of great American cities*. Vintage.
- Lefebvre, H. (1970) 2003. *The Urban Revolution*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Lefebvre, H. (1991). *The production of space* (Vol. 142). Blackwell: Oxford.
- Levitt, P. (2001). *The transnational villagers*. Univ of California Press.
- Levitt, P., & Lamba-Nieves, D. (2011). Social remittances revisited. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 37(1), 1-22.
- Mehta, S. (2009). *Maximum city: Bombay lost and found*. Vintage.
- Merrifield, A. (2000). A socialist in space. *Thinking space*, 9.
- Murray, C.M. (2020). *Envisioning and promoting The Corner 2.0: Insights & design principles for a transformative community hub future*. *St. James Town*. Retrieved from: <https://www.stjamestown.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/TheCorner2.0-FINAL-SpreadsComp.pdf>
- Parnell, S., and J. Robinson. (2012). "(Re)theorizing Cities from the Global South: Looking Beyond Neoliberalism." *Urban Geography*, 33 (4), 593–617.
- Peake, L. (2016). On feminism and feminist allies in knowledge production in urban geography. *Urban Geography*, 37(6), 830-838.
- Pieterse, E., Parnell, S., & Haysom, G. (2015). Towards an African urban agenda. *UN-Habitat and Economic Commission for Africa, UN-Habitat, Nairobi*.
- Rigg, J. (2007). *An everyday geography of the global south*. Routledge.
- Robinson, J., & Roy, A. (2016). Debate on global urbanisms and the nature of urban theory. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 40(1), 181-186.
- Roy, A. (2005). Urban informality: Toward an epistemology of planning. *Journal of the American planning association*, 71(2), 147-158.

- Roy, A. (2009a). Strangely familiar: Planning and the worlds of insurgence and informality. *Planning Theory*, 8(1), 7-11.
- Roy, A. (2009b). Why India cannot plan its cities: Informality, insurgence and the idiom of urbanization. *Planning theory*, 8(1), 76-87.
- Roy, A. (2016). What is urban about critical urban theory? *Urban Geography* 37(6), 810–823.
- Ruddick, S., Peake, L., Tanyildiz, G. S., & Patrick, D. (2018). Planetary urbanization: An urban theory for our time?. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 36(3), 387-404.
- Samers, M., & Collyer, M. (2016). *Migration*. Routledge.
- Saunders, D. (2011). *Arrival city: How the largest migration in history is reshaping our world*. Vintage.
- Schmid, C. (2008). Henri Lefebvre's theory of the production of space. *Space, difference, everyday life: reading Henri Lefebvre*, 27-45.
- Schmid, C. (2018). Journeys through planetary urbanization: Decentering perspectives on the urban. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 36(3), 591-610.
- Simone, A. (2016). It's Just the City After All! *International journal of urban and regional research*, 40(1), 210-218.
- Smith, N. (2010). *Uneven development: Nature, capital, and the production of space*. University of Georgia Press.
- St. James Town. (2021). A world within a block. *About the neighbourhood*. Retrieved from: <https://www.stjamestown.org/the-neighbourhood/#about-SJT>
- Streule, M., Karaman, O., Sawyer, L., & Schmid, C. (2020). Popular urbanization: Conceptualizing urbanization processes beyond informality. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 44(4), 652-672.
- Wright, T. (2019, August 9). *Growing number of newcomers, refugees ending up homeless in Canada: studies*. CBC. Retrieved from: <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/homeless-newcomers-refugees-canada-studies-1.5242426>
- Yiftachel, O. (2006). 'Re-Engaging Planning Theory? Towards "South-Eastern" Perspectives', *Planning Theory*, 5(3), 211–22.
- Zahirovic, S. (2007). *The Bijlmer: a Dutch Approach to Multiculturalism*. Humanity in Action. Retrieved from: [https://www.humanityinaction.org/knowledge\\_detail/the-bijlmer-a-dutch-approach-to-multiculturalism/](https://www.humanityinaction.org/knowledge_detail/the-bijlmer-a-dutch-approach-to-multiculturalism/)
- Zukin, S. (1989). *Loft living: Culture and capital in urban change*. Rutgers University Press.