



URBAN INFORMALITY IN THE GLOBAL NORTH: A VIEW FROM LOS ANGELES

Nancy H. Kwak

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6429-195X>

Email: nhkwak@ucsd.edu

^a University of California at San Diego, Humanities and Social Sciences,
Department of History, La Jolla, CA, United States

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História urbana global

ABSTRACT

Urban informality is often discussed and debated by scholars of cities in the Global South, but the term is used with much less frequency in studies of US cities. Looking at the daily functions of American cities, however, it is clear informality plays just as central a role in the US as in other cities around the world, whether in the housing sector, jobs, or land use. This article will discuss the longer historical arc leading to the present day with a focus on specific historical moments in Los Angeles history. I begin with the emergence of formalization and land titles in an era of colonization, continuing to a discussion of early-twentieth century land rights specifically in the communities of Chavez Ravine, and end with an exploration of urban informality in Skid Row.

KEYWORDS

Informality. Los Angeles. Housing.

Urban informality is often discussed and debated by scholars of the Global South, but it is a term used with much less certainty in studies of US cities. Much of the scholarship in the US has revolved around informality's more recent manifestations – not surprising given the omnipresence of informal activities in US metropolitan areas today, whether in uses of the built environment or in the labor market. It is entirely commonplace to see garage units for rent as living spaces (now encouraged in many cities but for decades, not permitted), to witness day laborers negotiating with anonymous employers pulling up in trucks and SUVs, and to observe the insurgent reclaiming of public spaces (VALENZUELA, 2000; HOU, 2010). Creative, small-scale efforts at commoning like garage sales, community gardens, and food carts regularly inject the informal into the everyday (CHASE; CRAWFORD; KALISKI, 1999). A small but critical group of US scholars has begun contributing to the rich global scholarship on informal urbanism by scrutinizing twentieth and early-twenty first century forms of informal economies in the US, sometimes termed DIY, self-help, tactical, guerilla, bottom-up, grassroots, or everyday urbanism (KINDER, 2016; DOUGLAS, 2018).

We are certainly living in an extraordinary moment when the interplay between informal and formal economies, between informal and formal labor, and between informal and formal land use is everywhere. While these emergent relationships certainly demand research and discussion for the current moment, in this article I hope to take a slightly different approach by situating present-day urban informality in the US in a longer history of land use struggles beginning with a consideration of the colonial period. This longer view places the twin themes of empire-building and land control at the center; a wider historical view, I argue, allows us to see how informality emerges today as the culmination of a particular kind of legal order – one built over centuries, often with explicit racial and class components, and as a result of fierce conflicts between groups and between residents and government actors. I hope to shed some light on how it is that some unregulated urbanism has come to be embraced and at times, formalized by the state, while other forms of unregulated urbanism are barely tolerated or marginalized and policed. If the word “informality” simply indicates an unregulated activity or space, then government responses play a critical role in the present and past.

It is important to begin by clarifying that urban informality cannot be treated merely as a description of specific actions or uses of space. Rather, it is a relational term – one that involves state actors and that can be changed or molded to suit particular needs. The musician spontaneously busking in the street is generating a kind of urban informality, but so is the day laborer living in a tent in a suburban canyon. Yet city officials have not perceived and responded to the two equally – I would dare say, in any US city. It becomes quickly apparent that the sheer variety of unregulated activities and spaces reflects the historical evolution of class-based, racialized claims to the city. The identity of those involved can determine the level of government acceptance, more than the activity itself. To give a somewhat facetious example, police officers are more tolerant of middle-class lemonade stands in middle-class neighborhoods than they are of working-class children selling candy bars in parking lots. While the line between informal and formal is an obvious one, then, municipal, state, and federal government officials have attempted to draw a line between acceptable and unacceptable informal uses as well. Urban informality can thus be understood as a tool or as a series of strategies – by government, certainly, to draw a line around what it does not regulate, but also by

urban dwellers pursuing basic needs, personal advantage, and spontaneous pleasure – strategies that are shaped by and that reinforce social markers like race and class. In focusing on governmental responses to unregulated land use, I propose a closer examination of the variety encompassed by categories like “unregulated space” and “informal use”. Urban informality never was one thing, but rather exists as a multitude of legal, extralegal, and illegal actions in physical spaces.

The history of formalization necessarily exists side by side with a history of informality. In the three centuries-long history of cities like Los Angeles, poor people’s initiatives and investments in neighborhoods did not lead to municipal efforts at formalization as often as they did to eviction and erasure. A mostly Mexican American community was well established at Chavez Ravine, for instance, but Los Angeles mayor Norris Poulson described the space as “inhabited by squatters and a small handful of small home owners whose goats, cows, and chickens roamed about,” and the city promptly arranged for the seizure and sale of said property along with the wholesale eviction of the community in 1959 (PARSON, 1993). White families in working-class suburbs of the early twentieth century, conversely, grew equity by setting up tents, self-built additions, and other DIY improvements; their informal housing investments were readily absorbed into formal property value that could be passed down to the next generation. Historian Becky Nicolaides (2019) astutely observes the role of race in shaping government attitudes toward informal housing in white working-class neighborhoods: Los Angeles’ “informal housing began as an auspicious opportunity for working-class whites in the 1920s, took on patriotic overtones during World War II, and then was essentially racialized and criminalized by the 1980s when the area flipped from white to Latino.” Emily Talen is absolutely correct in her assessment that “the idea of bottom-up, tactical, DIY urbanism forms an essential tradition in American urbanism,” but government responses varied widely, granting legitimacy to some and not others (TALEN, 2014, p. 138).

The most recent wave of formalization in Los Angeles tells a similar story. In the face of an escalating affordable housing crisis, the city passed an Unpermitted Dwelling Unit Ordinance in 2017, allowing owners of extra rooms and structures (e.g., informal backyard sheds or “granny flats”) to apply for legalization. Predictably, the beneficiaries were primarily homeowners – and secondarily, politicians who could claim they had produced more affordable housing without spending city money. The city’s attitude was different when it came to the DIY structures of truly poor people living in Skid Row adjacent to the rapidly upscaling downtown LA, however. There, police raids regularly dismantled tents and self-built shelters, including the regular seizure and destruction of property such as furniture, bed pallets, and personal effects. To be fair, the issue of housing access for homelessness people is a complicated one, with mayor Eric Garcetti, city officials, the LA Police Department, LA County officers from the Department of Public Health, Governor Gavin Newsom, the state Department of Health Services, city/state/federal judges, and most recently, the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention weighing in on the best way forward. Despite all these government actors, there is one clear consensus: formalization is not an option for self-built structures along freeway underpasses, in canyons, along the LA River and in the seasonally dry riverbed. Looking at formalization as a whole, then, informal tactics with middle- and upper-class actors (or serving them) can be absorbed into formal structures, while “unacceptable” informality begets either more unacceptable informality



(unhoused people choosing to move to new locations) or to closely monitored spaces (city shelters, city sanctioned tent camps, city monitored hotel rooms, etc.)

There is one other aspect to urban informality both historically and in the present moment. While informality can be a tool of government, at other times the category can simply denote the weak position of government vis-à-vis larger economic forces: unhoused families living in self-made shelter in the hills and canyons, for instance, occupy informal housing, but city officials are only partially aware of these settlements. Often, it takes calamity to make city officials more aware of these settlements.¹ Even if they knew, it is not clear whether or not municipal governments have the political will and the economic ability to do something about them. Similarly, private homeowners lack full knowledge and control over urban informality in their own backyards: Southern Californians are often dismayed to find people living on their canyon property, but they are helpless to evict them permanently or to even know exactly when and how many people are present at any given moment.

Informality can also be a deliberate hiring strategy to avoid the costs of regulation: the rich and middle classes regularly dodge taxes by paying under the table for service workers to clean buildings and cars, manicure gardens, tend and tutor children, and provide restaurant service. Even when urban dwellers are not directly paying for an informal service, they benefit from informal labor as seen in the benefits, for instance, of cheap, fresh, and readily available food. Informal workers themselves depend on informal urban networks to provide for their own basic needs, thereby keeping middle- and upper-class consumer costs down and also building another layer of informality into the functioning of US cities. In this way, then, urban informality plays a critical role in the order and operations of US cities hooked into a global, capitalist economy.

FORMALIZATION AND LAND TITLES IN AN ERA OF COLONIZATION

In the US as in many other places, the concept of legal and illegal land use finds its origins in colonial structures. The example of Los Angeles is particularly instructive because of its complex colonial history as a Spanish, Mexican, and US town/city, and because of the particulars of its evolution adjacent to the indigenous Tongvan town of Yaanga. When Spanish Governor of Alta California Felipe de Neve established El Pueblo de la Reina de Los Angeles in 1779, he deliberately chose a site adjacent to the indigenous town of Yaanga after surveying Tongvan land use patterns and water systems. Pobladores (Spanish settlers) learned from Tongvan land use strategies in order to build their city (TORRES-ROUFF, 2013, p. 23-24). Situated next to the Porciuncula River (Los Angeles River) and organized in a grid around a plaza according to the rules of the Law of the Indies, land in the new town was divided by use categories: land owned by the pueblo collectively would be rented out and the profit, stored in municipal coffers; common land would be used by the community; pasture areas would provide shared space for livestock; uncultivated public areas would be reserved and owned by the King.

¹ Fires and flooding can alert officials to informality. For two examples, see Hector Becerra and Jessica Gresko (2005), and Louis Sahagun (2015).



This early Spanish delineation of land use may or may not have been recognized by Yaangavit, but one early consequence of the settlement was clear to all: Spanish and then Mexican decisions about land use (especially the raising of livestock) wholly disrupted Tongvan land use patterns and left the town of Yaanga vulnerable. Indigenous people streamed into the area seeking jobs in Mexican Los Angeles while also depending on accommodations in Yaanga. In response, Mexican city officials tried to marginalize the Tongvan settlement adjoining Los Angeles. Even though Yaanga was the earlier settlement, and even though Yaangavit (residents of Yaanga) helped construct the infrastructure of the Spanish and then Mexican city, the ayuntamiento repeatedly relocated Yaanga in an attempt to transform the town into a place of impermanence and political vulnerability akin to a refugee camp. By the mid-nineteenth century, Yaangavit had been moved at least five times (pre-1836, 1836, 1845, 1846, and 1847), including a forced move east across the Los Angeles River in 1845 ostensibly because of undesirable Tongvan water uses (MORRIS; JOHNSON; SCHWARTZ; VELLANOWETH; SCHWEBEL, 2016). In less than one century, an established town had become a site of contestation, subject to the relocation schemes of people residing outside its borders.

When US colonists began arriving in sizable numbers to the once Spanish and now Mexican city, they challenged the land rights of Californios – Mexican hacienda owners and rancheros – this time installing a different legal regime of land titling. Neither the signing of the Treaty of Cahuenga in 1847 nor the official transition to US control with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848 resulted in a sudden consensus about land rights, however. Quite the contrary: according to historian Kelly Lytle Hernandez, “The people living in this region had only nominally and occasionally recognized Mexican rule... The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo and its proclamation of US rule, therefore, meant little in the contested lands between Texas and the Pacific Ocean” (HERNANDEZ, 2017, p. 34). Instead, US colonists’ land rights were created through brutal force and an escalation of violence against indigenous residents. For Tongvans, eighteen land treaties were signed from 1851-53, land claimed by US settlers, and the promised 8.5 million acres of reservation retracted by the US Senate.² Through a potent mix of legal land titling, chicanery, and outright violence, the US managed to erase formal land rights.

Bureaucracy went hand in hand with formalization. Lieutenant Edward C. Ord’s survey and map of 1849 took the next step in enforcing new legal regimes for Californios, and a Land Commission of 1851 required all landowners to submit their land claims within two years. Californios’ *diseños* (property sketches) were deemed insufficient in claiming title, and surveying and legal representation work quietly drained the resources of Californios (ESTRADA, 2008, p. 54). According to Carey McWilliams, “[a]t least 40% of the land owned under Mexican grants was sold, by the owners, to meet the costs and expenses involved in complying with the Act of 1851” (MCWILLIAMS, 2008, p. 62). Once claims were submitted, the commission reviewed them from 1852-56 and determined their legitimacy.

Here, the political pressure brought by white squatters is intriguing. Throughout the nineteenth century, European, white settlers had been moving from the east coast

² This history is detailed by the Gabrielino-Tongvan Tribe’s history page online at <http://www.gabrielinotribe.org/historical-sites-1/>.

to California and claiming land as squatters, arguing that their use and improvement of the land granted them rights to property in the public domain. The words, squatter and squatting, were commonly parlance to refer to the practice of claims-making. Preemption laws (passed in 1830, 1834, 1838, and 1841) upheld the idea that squatters had some legitimate claims to property, and squatters in newly acquired California pressed their point by demanding privatization of communal land and redistribution (PISANI, 2020). According to California's territorial Secretary of State Henry Halleck, this aggressive push for land resulted in many "irregular proceedings" (REICH, 2001, p. 358). The federal Homestead Act of 1862 added another level of bureaucratic chaos as it emboldened squatters to claim up to 160 acres of land. Ultimately these legal actions meant to appease and address the concerns of squatters pointed to a more powerful source of land rights for newcomers to Los Angeles: squatters put enormous pressure on the political system to bequeath private land rights by maintaining a steady drumbeat of bloody racial and ethnic violence on city streets (DEVERELL, 2004, p. 35).

This rough century of colonization demonstrates the violent process by which Americans created a formal land market in California, generally, and in Los Angeles, in particular. For Americans, ethnoracial status mattered more in determining land rights than the law: white squatters could claim titles based on their occupation of land, and they could demand legislators and judges write and interpret the law to accommodate these rights. And in the early and mid-nineteenth century, both Californians and Californios worked to dispossess and delegitimize indigenous land claims, dismissing multigenerational land use by Tongvans and transforming established settlements like Yaanga into marginalized, peripheral encampments. More succinctly, American Angelenos used land titling systems to seize property.

EARLY TWENTIETH-CENTURY LAND RIGHTS

By the turn of the century, land rights in Los Angeles were standardized to some degree, and the volatility of the 1850s had subsided. Mexican American residents in central and East Los Angeles lived in neighborhoods that largely escaped official notice (MOLINA, 2006, p. 47). Because of this lack of official tracking, it is difficult to ascertain the precise starting point for Mexican American communities in Chavez Ravine.³ Certainly, if there were Mexican families in Chavez Ravine at the end of the century, they were part of a larger spatial pattern of dispersal. According to George Sánchez, at the start of the twentieth century nonwhite Angelenos experienced an anomalous moment of racial blending; barrios and barrioization would not return until after World War II. Downtown and East Los Angeles neighborhoods housed mixed groups of non-white and Jewish residents with Mexicans constituting about 20-40% (except in the old Plaza area where they made up the majority) (SÁNCHEZ, 1995, p. 77).⁴ Late-nineteenth century maps give little indication of land use in the Chavez Ravine area northeast of downtown, although an 1884 US Department Surveyor map

³ Sanborn maps from 1906, 1907, 1919, 1920, 1921, and 1922 offer intriguing, if incomplete clues. Sanborn Map Company. Los Angeles City, Los Angeles County, CA, available through the Library of Congress Digital Collections, <https://www.loc.gov/collections/sanborn-maps/?fa=location:california%7Clocation:los+angeles#>.

⁴ For more on barrioization, see Albert Camarillo (1979) and Richard Griswold del Castillo (1980).

of the city did note a few landowners on the periphery of the site including the names of landowners Keller, Hansen, J.G. Downey and Childs, A.R. Loomis, and Babcock. The five parallel ravines – Chavez, Sulphur, Cemetery, and Solano – had some of the largest unmarked land tracts in the city proper, and two years later would become part of the new Elysian Park.⁵

According to attorney Marshall Stimson, the first 200 families moved to Chavez Ravine under his direction in 1913. Stimson claimed to have sold homesites to families living in the Los Angeles River Bottom, thus providing them “pride of ownership” and good “humble homes” (SETTLEMENT..., 1951). Residents lived in largely self-made and self-improved structures, clustered in the three distinct neighborhoods of Palo Verde, La Loma, and Bishop, and incorporating generous access to open land and space to raise domestic livestock. By the 1950s, Mexican American communities living in the area had expanded to between 970 and 1,800 households holding some 3,300 inhabitants (CUFF, 2001, p. 276).

It is not entirely clear how families perceived their own position as residents and landowners. The paper trail is weak here: how did each family come to occupy each site, and how were boundaries determined? Did boundary disputes arise between families? How did landowners make sense of rights to open space? Land titles and tract surveys in the area offer little data. It is perhaps impossible to know now how landowners perceived their property rights individually and in the aggregate. Did they all believe they owned the land because of the time and energy they had put into it? To what extent did they value the bureaucratic process of land titling?

In any case, it seemed the city did not care to challenge the legitimacy of land claims, at least initially: in its earliest overtures in the summer of 1950, the city aimed to negotiate purchase agreements with all residents and to clear the entire site under the terms of slum clearance. An earlier Home Owners’ Loan Corporation map had already marked the area as deteriorating, and the Housing Authority of Los Angeles now declared the site as “98% substandard”. The City Health Department, echoed the sentiment, calling the area a slum (HUGE..., 1950). Only after some families resisted selling their homes did some government officials begin questioning the legitimacy of their land claims (perhaps no comments were more dismissive than mayor Norris Poulson’s characterization of the area as “inhabited by squatters and a small handful of small home owners”) (CHAVEZ..., 2004).

When the Housing Authority of Los Angeles finally forcibly evicted holdouts, it did so using the language of slum clearance and public purpose rather than with any talk of squatters and shantytowns. Slums were the product of land uses from the past and from other places; by this logic, landowners who lived in inferior, unsanitary dwellings had no choice but to give way to the inevitable progress of a modern American city. Even in its defense of Chavez Ravine residents’ right to stay, the *Los Angeles Times* called up similar images of quaint, rural Mexicans and their distinctly unmodern land uses. Interviewees “look with mournful eyes at the tiny Mexican village that is Chavez Ravine. They see its arroyos, washes, gullies, and the twisting street that follow them – streets with curiously American names like Effie, Paducah, Bishops, Gabriel, Stimson, Curtis”. For the most part, the article continued, “The citizens of Chavez Ravine led their lives

⁵ Map of the City of Los Angeles California by H.J. Stevenson, U.S. Dept. Surveyor, 1884, 72395, The Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

apart from the city". A visiting Marshall Stimson added, "It was like a village in Mexico and seemed hundreds of miles removed from Los Angeles" (SETTLEMENT..., 1951).

By now there is ample scholarship explaining the racialized discourse within urban redevelopment and urban renewal schemes at the local and national levels.⁶ Historians have also thoroughly documented the Cold War context in which key political actors successfully nixed the planned public housing project of Elysian Park Heights, and instead ended up supporting the construction of Dodger Stadium on the cleared site.⁷ What is more intriguing from the point of view of this article, however, is the process by which three communities flourished and grew largely outside the view of city government, then transformed almost overnight into a "slum" requiring the most intensive government regulation and intervention. While the terms "formality" and "informality" were not commonplace at this time, certainly they are useful in looking back: the government did not dispute that Chavez Ravine was a formal housing market with titled properties, but instead used slum clearance law and procedure to negate the rights attached to ownership. Chavez Ravine residents certainly struggled with the absence of key city services like piped water and electricity, but the city only took notice and observed informal characteristics in order to justify the erasure of ownership rights. Put another way, the federal urban renewal program created gradations in the concept of land ownership, making some owners more vulnerable than others. A title was not a title: a homeowner with lower sociopolitical standing or with poorer housing conditions was vulnerable to state action. Once evicted, families quietly disappeared from government records.

LATE TWENTIETH-CENTURY INFORMALITY IN SKID ROW

Of course, the most extreme class of urban dwellings without direct access to basic services (water, sewage, power) is found not in any formal homeownership community in Los Angeles, but rather in the self-built encampments on the streets of Skid Row. Skid Row's history in Los Angeles is a long one, traceable back to the construction of the railroad in the 1870s, when an influx of transient workers lived in cheap rental or self-constructed ad hoc housing. The economic crises of the 1890s and 1930s brought more poor people to the area – a convergence of people that only increased in number through the city's urban renewal efforts of the 1950s and 60s. California passed a Community Redevelopment Law in 1945 and 1949 that targeted urban blight and that primed the state to make use of federal Title I (Housing Act of 1949) money facilitating slum clearance and urban rehabilitation. Bunker Hill in downtown became the first major urban renewal site; 6,000 individuals were relocated and high-end urban amenities like a cultural center, installed. With the development of the Music Center, more commercial and industrial development, and more legal enforcement and regulation (in particular, seismic retrofits for older buildings), downtown rapidly lost affordable housing even as residents lacked the ability to move to other neighborhoods. By 1968-1969, the Community Redevelopment Agency (CRA) decided any redevelopment of Skid Row

⁶ One of the most thorough analyses of the racial dimensions specifically for Chavez Ravine is Eric Avila (2003).

⁷ For some of this history, see Thomas S. Hines (1982), Eric Avila (2004), Don Parson (2005), and Ron W. López (2009).



would be too “complex and expensive and would lead to dispersal of the area’s existing population” (COMMUNITY, 2006).

Los Angeles city planners were torn from the start between these two competing interests: on the one hand, city officials did not want to see unhoused people spreading out into other neighborhoods. On the other hand, downtown interests saw the area as a major impediment to revitalization. Mayor-appointed Blue Ribbon Citizens’ Advisory Committee with representatives from business groups and the Community Redevelopment Agency in 1972 declared Skid Row the “number one problem and priority of the committee” (HAAS; HESKIN, 1981, p. 555). The city did not begin collecting tallies of unhoused people until 1993 when the Los Angeles Homeless Service Authority was formed; this was a concern expressed without formal data. Arguably, the high visibility of informal settlers on city streets pointed to an obviously desperate crisis requiring no further evidence.⁸

This tension between physical containment and business expansion was in full display in the CRA’s 1975 Central Business District Redevelopment Plan, where single room occupancy hotels and social services were rehabilitated, while assistance was given to bolster the food, garment, flower, warehouse, toy, and wholesale districts. By 1976, the CRA had come to see Skid Row in grim terms: “it is the presence of bums, derelicts, drunks, and mentally unstable persons in public, business, shopping, and industrial areas of the city. Most people are uncomfortable around Skid Row derelicts, many are afraid”. Community organizers successfully restrained city officials eager to raze the entire neighborhood, instead reaching a compromise with a “Policy of Containment” in 1976 that would keep unhoused people physically enclosed in Skid Row. The neighborhood would henceforth live with clear boundaries (Third Street, Seventh Street, Alameda Street, and Main Street) and those living inside would be attracted to Skid Row by a “magnet” while being kept from “wandering” into neighboring communities by a “buffer zone.” Under this new plan, the CRA deliberately upgraded housing and social services in Skid Row and moved charities back to the physical center of the neighborhood. At the same time, they removed benches, bathrooms, and other important amenities from the downtown space, making it inhospitable and uncomfortable. Street lighting was brightened in the buffer zone to prevent people from setting up informal shelter in the in-between, and space was leased to light industry in a ring around Skid Row. Lastly and most forcefully, the Los Angeles Police Department was charged with enforcing the buffer zone. By 2006, a “Safer Cities Initiative” invested US \$6 million per year in increasing patrol officers in the area. According to a 2013 study, Skid Row became one of the largest concentrations of standing police forces in the country, with the LAPD making 9,000 arrests for a total Skid Row population of 12-15,000 people (DEENER; ERIE; KOOGAN; STUART, 2013).

Given this level of policing and the desperate need for better accommodations, decent healthcare, mental health services, substance abuse support for some, and food assistance, it is surprising to see informal housing continuing to grow, not shrink, in Skid Row. In 2019, numbers rose by every measure: the county saw a 16% increase, the city, 12%, and Skid Row, 11%, all up from 2018 numbers. This uneasy symbiosis between formal and informal, downtown and Skid Row, points to the ways that Los Angeles’ formal housing and employment system (among other aspects) depends on

⁸ For more on the collection of data, see COWAN; BREakey; FISCHER, 1988.

Skid Row. A city that refuses to provide adequate health services and that relies on an endless stream of cheap labor also needs somewhere for the poor to go when they cannot afford the market. Informal “solutions” like self-built tents, cardboard mattresses, plastic-bottle bathrooms, and charity healthcare are not simply survival strategies of the poor, but they also make an ever-growing Los Angeles possible. As such, the informal tactics of the urban poor are a damning critique of the city’s growth agenda. Informal strategies are not optional, but they are still impressive, including efforts like John Malpede’s arts and performance group cleverly named the Los Angeles Poverty Department. The LAPD has collected interviews of some residents (Walk the Talk) and maintains an archive of oral histories – a vital resource meant to foreground the humanity and individual life experiences of each resident.

While the formal economy requires the informal one in the broadest sense, in the specific space of downtown, the two are set on what geographer Jennifer Wolch called a “collision course” (REDEVELOPMENT..., 1997). Skid Row residents took a first bold step toward claiming political representation in 2017. That year, Skid Row community members attempted to create a neighborhood council separate from downtown. The measure was defeated at the polls, and the matter was taken to LA Superior Court where the judge ruled against Skid Row in February of 2020.

CONCLUSION

Looking across the long sweep of Los Angeles history, there are some threads we might pull through these three centuries. First, it is clear that the informal and formal are not only simultaneously occurring in American cities, but they are also interlinked. As Frank Gaffikin, David Perry, and Ratoola Kundu point out in a recent volume, the formal and the informal exist in the same places and at the same times for a reason; formal and informal urbanism mutually reinforce each other and work as a single process (GAFFIKIN; KUNDU, 2011). I would agree with this assessment and add that this intertwined system is one that has emerged in critical ways over the *longue durée*. Other scholars like Vinit Mukhija and Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris brilliantly point out the centrality of urban informality in the Global North; the case of Los Angeles substantiates such a claim, while once again underscoring the importance of looking at this phenomenon as an historical outcome (MUKHIJA; LOUKAITOU-SIDERIS, 2014).

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AUTHOR'S NOTES

AUTHOR DETAILS

Nancy H. Kwak: PhD. Associate Professor, University of California at San Diego, Humanities and Social Sciences, Department of History, La Jolla, CA, United States.

CORRESPONDENCE ADDRESS

Department of History, Humanities and Social Sciences Building, 5th floor, 9500 Gilman Drive #0104, La Jolla, CA 92093-0104, United States.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many thanks to Professor Mariana L. R. Dantas and Professor João Júlio Gomes dos Santos Júnior.

FUNDING

Not applicable.

ETHICS COMMITTEE APPROVAL

Not applicable.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

No conflicts of interest.



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PUBLISHER

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EDITORS

Flávia Florentino Varella (Editor-in-chief)
Rodrigo Bragio Bonaldo

HISTORY

Received on: Aug. 23, 2020

Approved on: Dec. 14, 2020

How to cite: KWAK, Nancy H. Urban informality in the Global North: a view from Los Angeles. *Esboços*, Florianópolis, v. 28, n. 47, p. 182-196, jan./abr. 2021.

