

**MAKING A PLACE IN THE CITY:
PLACE-MAKING IN URBAN INFORMAL
SETTLEMENTS IN MEXICO**

Thesis submitted for the degree of PhD

by

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Abstract

Observers from a variety of disciplines agree that informal settlements account for the majority of housing in cities of the global South. Urban informal settlements, usually defined by certain criteria such as self-build housing, sub-standard services, and residents' low incomes, are often seen as problematic, due to associations with poverty, irregularity and marginalisation. In particular, despite years of research showing otherwise, policy and academic discourses continue to emphasise a division between the 'formal' and 'informal' city, meaning that informal settlements are often treated as outside 'normal' urban considerations. This thesis argues that the discursive construction of urban informal settlements in this way may contribute to their marginalisation, with material effects for residents, including displacement and eviction. Moving beyond static, binary characterisations of urban informal settlements, it aims to use a place-making approach to explore the discursive, spatial, social, cultural and political construction of place in this context, in order to unsettle some of the assumptions underlying these marginalising discourses. Research was carried out using a qualitative, ethnographic methodology in two case study neighbourhoods in Xalapa, Mexico.

Mexico offers fertile ground to explore these issues. Despite an extensive regularisation programme, around 50 per cent of urban dwellers live in *colonias populares*, neighbourhoods with informal characteristics. The research found that local discourses reveal complex and ambivalent views of *colonias populares*, which both reproduce and undermine binary categorisations relating to 'informality'. In particular, local policies construct *colonias populares* in certain ways which may perpetuate their marginalisation, but also reveal the complexities of power relations affecting neighbourhoods within the city. However, it is a focus on residents' own place-making activities that hints at prospects for rethinking urban informal settlements. By capturing these messy, dynamic and contextualised processes that construct urban informal settlements as *places*, the analytical lens of place-making offers a view of the multiple influences which frame them. Informed by perspectives from critical social geography which seek to unsettle binaries and capture the 'ordinary' nature of cities, this thesis suggests imagining urban informal settlements differently, in order to re-evaluate their potential contribution to the city as a whole.

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Acronyms used in the text

CAEV	Comisión del Agua del Estado de Veracruz <i>Veracruz State Water Commission</i>
CENVI	Centro de la Vivienda y Estudios Urbanos <i>Centre of Studies in Housing and Urbanism</i>
CFE	Comisión Federal de Electricidad <i>Federal Electricity Commission</i>
CIESAS	Centro de Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social <i>Centre for Higher Studies in Social Anthropology</i>
CMAS	Comisión Municipal de Agua Potable y Saneamiento <i>Municipal Water and Drainage Commission</i>
CONAFE	Consejo Nacional de Fomento Educativo <i>National Council for the Promotion of Education</i>
CONAMUP	Coordinadora Nacional del Movimiento Urbano Popular <i>National Coordinator of the Urban Popular Movement</i>
CORETT	Comisión de la Regularización de la Tenencia de la Tierra <i>Commission for the Regularisation of Land Tenure</i>
DGDU	Dirección General de Desarrollo Urbano <i>Municipal Office of Urban Development</i>
DGOP	Dirección General de Obras Públicas <i>Municipal Office of Public Works</i>
DGOUR	Dirección General de Ordenamiento Urbano y Regional <i>Veracruz State Office for Urban and Regional Land-Use Planning</i>
DGPC	Dirección General de Gestión Social, Participación Ciudadana y Vecinal <i>Municipal Office of Social Management, Citizen and Resident Participation</i>
FOGA	Fondo de Garantía y Apoyo para los Créditos de Vivienda <i>Guarantee and Support Fund for Housing Credits</i>
FOVI	Fondo de Operación y Descuento Bancario a la Vivienda <i>Low-Cost Fund for Housing Transactions</i>
FOVISSSTE	Fondo de la Vivienda del Instituto de Seguridad y Servicios Sociales de los Trabajadores del Estado <i>Federal Public Employee Housing Fund</i>
HIC	Habitat Internacional Coalición <i>Habitat International Coalition</i>

IDERE	Instituto Veracruzano de Fomento al Desarrollo Regional <i>Veracruz Institute for the Promotion of Regional Development</i>
IIHS	Instituto de Investigaciones Histórico-Sociales (Universidad Veracruzana) <i>Institute of Historic and Social Research (Veracruz University)</i>
INEGI	Instituto Nacional de Estadística, Geografía e Informática <i>National Institute of Statistics, Geography and Information</i>
INFONAVIT	Instituto del Fondo Nacional para la Vivienda de los Trabajadores <i>National Funding Institute for Workers' Housing</i>
MOPI	Movimiento Obrero Popular Independiente <i>Workers' Independent Movement</i>
MUP	Movimiento Urbano Popular <i>Urban Popular Movement</i>
PAN	Partido de Acción Nacional <i>National Action Party</i>
PNDU	Plan Nacional de Desarrollo Urbano <i>National Urban Development Plan</i>
PRD	Partido de la Revolución Democrática <i>Democratic Revolution Party</i>
PRI	Partido Revolucionario Institucional <i>Institutional Revolutionary Party</i>
PROCEDE	Programa de Certificación de Derechos Ejidales <i>Ejidal Rights Certification Programme</i>
PROGRESA	Programa de Educación, Salud y Alimentación <i>Education, Health and Nutrition Programme</i>
PRONASOL	Programa Nacional de Solidaridad <i>National Solidarity Programme</i>
SAHOP	Secretaría de Asentamientos Humanos y Obras Públicas <i>(Federal) Ministry of Human Settlements and Public Works</i>
SEDESOL	Secretaría de Desarrollo Social <i>(Federal) Ministry of Social Development</i>
SEV	Secretaría de Educación Veracruz <i>Veracruz State Education Department</i>
UCISV-Ver	Unión de Colonos Inquilinos y Solicitantes de Vivienda - Veracruz <i>Veracruz Tenants' and Housing Petitioners' Union</i>

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

[T]he cities of the future, rather than being made out of glass and steel as envisioned by earlier generations of urbanists, are instead largely constructed out of crude brick, straw, recycled plastic, cement blocks and scrap wood. Instead of cities of light soaring toward heaven, much of the twenty-first-century urban world squats in squalor, surrounded by pollution, excrement, and decay.
Mike Davis *Planet of Slums* (2006: 19)

The common perception of slums as locations of poverty, squalor, destitution, insecurity and danger tells one part of the story – but there are also stories of enterprising, hardworking slum denizens. Life in a shantytown is full of challenges and hardship, but shanties are homes, where conversations take place over dinner, kids do homework, and neighbors live next door.
Jonas Bendiksen *The Places We Live* (2008: 5-6)

The urban phenomenon of informal settlement has been the subject of decades of research and policy, in which ‘slums’ are often depicted as the embodiment of the ‘informal’ city, where not-quite-urban residents live in squalor and illegitimacy. Accounts such as the above quote from Davis (2005) paint a picture of places blighted by vice, illegality and filth. In doing so, they follow a thread that can be detected running through academic and policy debates on urban informal settlements, in which these places are implicitly separated from the idea of the city: they are seen as elsewhere, nowhere, other. However, as Bendiksen (2008) suggests, alongside the constrained living conditions, ordinary stories of everyday urban life exist in informal settlements. For the residents of these places, they are home, the site of both mundane and extraordinary events; but the prevalence of overwhelmingly negative representations of urban informal settlements means that frequently, these ‘ordinary’ accounts are not heard. In fact, ideas which ‘other’ these neighbourhoods have the potential for material effects, and are part of residents’ lived experiences of the city.

The words of a young resident from an informal settlement in Xalapa, the Mexican city where I carried out research, provide a fitting illustration of this. Nearing the end of my trip, during a visit to one of the *colonias populares*¹ there, I was surprised when Blanca, a young woman who had participated in the research, thanked me. When I asked why, she

¹ A limited glossary of foreign terms is included as Appendix Six.

explained that it was unusual for ‘outsiders’ to visit the neighbourhood; and even more so for them to return repeatedly and ‘coexist’ with residents. ‘When people visit Loma Bonita, sometimes they don’t get on with the residents, or they treat us as if we’re not normal’, she told me, ‘We offer them something to eat, and they turn their nose up, as if the food were disgusting’. The interface illustrated by this quote, between ideas which circulate about urban informal settlements and the lived experiences of their residents, is an important exploratory focus for this thesis.

Globally, around one billion urban dwellers live in urban informal settlements (UN-Habitat 2008: 90), which are built largely by their residents’ efforts. However, these places are often devalued, unrecognised, labelled unlawful and stigmatised. In cities where informal settlements develop, exclusion and ‘othering’ of these places through spatial and social marginalisation are common, as suggested above. Despite years of research and policy initiatives regarding urban informal settlements, academic and policy discourses still struggle to understand these places. In fact, it may be that ‘discourses’ (taken to mean words, meanings and images, presented as ‘truths’ about the world) of informality are part of the problem. Discursive marginalisation can occur at the level of general academic and policy discourses, where the ‘other urban history’ is not told (Hardoy and Satterthwaite 1989), or where only negative aspects of places are brought to light (Robinson 2006).

It is on the basis of this problem – that discourses about informality may contribute to, as well as describe, the marginalisation of urban informal settlements – that the research aim is formulated. The discursive circulation of ideas based on certain assumptions may have tangible effects for urban residents, particularly those living in urban informal settlements. The research aim is to critically examine understandings of urban informal settlements, in order to unsettle and unpick some of the underlying assumptions that may contribute to the marginalising effects of discourses. This is undertaken through an exploration of the discursive, spatial, social, cultural and political construction of two *colonias populares* in a medium-sized city in Mexico, based on the lived experiences of their residents, and other sources such as policy documents, public opinion and media reports.

In support of this aim, this thesis contrasts simplified, homogenising discursive constructions of *colonias populares* with the lived experiences of their residents, which may be shaped by, but are not limited to, the effects of these discourses. In this way, it also seeks to increase understandings of residents' views and their constructive efforts in place, which are often neglected in the local context and in wider discourses. The research aim is pursued using critical social geographic conceptions of 'place', and specifically, employing 'place-making' as an analytical lens. By applying concepts from outside the 'usual' debates on urban informal settlements, an innovative intellectual approach is fashioned, with the potential to unsettle some of the more entrenched assumptions about these places.

The themes and issues underpinning this research aim and approach are explored in more detail in this introductory chapter, which is divided into four sections on: urban informal settlements and marginalisation; marginalising discourses; unsettling binaries and ordinary places; and urban informal settlements in Mexico. The chapter closes with an outline of the thesis structure.

1.1 Urban informal settlements and marginalisation

Urban informal settlements are estimated to be home to around one-third of the world's urban population (UN-Habitat 2008), mostly located in the cities of the global South². Such settlements are normally defined in academic literature according to certain criteria, including elements such as self-build housing, substandard services, and low resident incomes. A precise definition for the term 'urban informal settlement' is hard to pin down, as it is subject to many different interpretations in academic and policy discourses. Furthermore, the 'informal' label, which often denotes lack of regulation (Moser 1994), has been applied to many overlapping sectors of society, including work, trade and infrastructure. 'Informality' has been used to refer to entire sectors of society, covering

² It is acknowledged that this term, which denotes what have also been labelled 'developing countries' or 'the Third World', is problematic. It relates to low- and middle-income countries which are generally located in the Southern hemisphere, as opposed to Europe and North America. The term's inadequacies are highlighted in the case of Mexico, which is north of the equator and is increasingly aligned with North rather than 'Latin America', a spurious categorisation in itself (Mignolo 2005). However, Mexico shares many characteristics with other global Southern countries, including the prevalence of urban informal settlements, and hence the terminology has been retained here.

employment, housing, infrastructure and trade, among other things. Here, the literature consulted deals mainly with urban informal settlements, as this is the focus of the research. Where the term 'informality' is used, it refers to human settlements, unless otherwise indicated; whereas 'the informal sector' refers to the wider range of informal activity.

Many authors highlight the difficulty of using a single term for the multiple, diverse forms of low-income housing that exist in the global South (e.g. Payne 1989; Imperato and Rusler 2003; D'Cruz and Satterthwaite 2005). These forms include the masses of dwellings which make up settlements on the peripheries and in the centre of many cities, such as the *favelas* of Rio de Janeiro, the *bustees* of Calcutta and the *barriadas* of Lima. It is generally agreed that causal factors include high levels of urbanisation, whether based on migration or other forms of urban growth, and lack of corresponding housing (and land) provision. But the wide range of different types of settlement depends on factors such as ownership, land transfer and tenure, as well as levels of infrastructure. Indeed, the root of the definitional problem may be the myriad forms of informality, as well as the fact that different definitions reflect different philosophical approaches (Gilbert and Gugler 1992).

Informal settlements, then, are 'conceptually complex and methodologically elusive' (UN-Habitat 2006: 27). A fairly typical conceptualisation from academic literature mentions 'DIY housing, inadequate services and gradual improvement of the neighbourhoods through formation of local committees' (Everett 2001: 457). More specifically, Gilbert and Gugler (1992: 123) define urban informal settlements as fulfilling at least two of the following four categories:

- 1) most dwellings have been built by their occupiers;
- 2) the settlement was originally illegal or lacking planning permission;
- 3) infrastructure and services in the settlement were originally lacking;
- 4) the settlement is occupied by the poor, however defined.

Meanwhile, UN-Habitat (2006: 19) defines a 'slum' as 'a settlement in an urban area in which more than half of the inhabitants live in inadequate housing and lack basic services'.

So different accounts emphasise different characteristics of urban informal settlements. Some estimates suggest that up to 90 per cent of new housing in cities of the global South is constructed by residents themselves (Hardoy and Satterthwaite 1989: 12). Others have asserted that the true builders and planners of these cities are the urban poor, as illegal, mainly self-built houses continue to represent the largest source of new city housing (McAuslan 1985: 11). However, informal settlements have also been seen as a spatial manifestation of urban poverty and inequality (UN-Habitat 2003: xxvi). In particular, degrees of illegality in terms of land occupation and nonconformity with official regulations are often highlighted as common factors (e.g. Devas 2004), relating to the fact that informal settlements are usually built by their residents on marginal urban land, following invasion or illegal subdivision. This means they fail to conform to regulatory frameworks, resulting in insecurity of tenure, whether *de jure* (due to lack of formal titles) or *de facto* (due to the risk of eviction or other threats).

Urban informal settlements are often seen primarily as a problem, due to their associations with poverty, irregularity and marginalisation. They are frequently perceived as existing on the edges of cities, although their location on 'marginal' urban land does not necessarily imply that they are spatially peripheral: for example, much informal development in South Africa and Brazil occurs in city centres (Few et al. 2004). On the other hand, in Mexico, as in many Latin American countries, informal settlement often occurs through semi-legal occupation of rural land close to urban areas. Land for informal settlements may be considered marginal because it is of little or no value to other interests, for environmental or infrastructural reasons. Spatial segregation of informal settlements within major urban areas is a contributing factor to their marginalisation, as they may be physically separated from the rest of the city, by roads, industry or simply remoteness.

Marginalisation occurs when groups or places come to be seen as 'relationally distant and relatively disconnected from the "rest" of the city and its main activities' (Mooney 1999: 65). The effects of marginalisation, which include discrimination, poverty and exclusion, are well-documented in the case of urban informal settlements. UN-Habitat (2006) states that disease and mortality rates are higher in 'slums' than in 'non-slum' urban areas,

alongside other elements of urban deprivation, such as inequality of access to services, housing, land, education, health care and employment opportunities. This is against a backdrop of increasing inequality and marginalisation in most cities of the world, exacerbating insecurity and social unrest; in particular, Latin American cities have some of the highest levels of urban inequality worldwide (UN-Habitat 2008).

In the 1960s and 1970s, urban theorists working primarily in Latin America (e.g. Mangin 1967; Turner 1972; Perlman 1976; Lloyd 1979) were concerned to expose the pernicious effects of marginalisation on urban residents, and to suggest what the causes, implications and solutions might be. However, in the case of Mexico, research published in English in the 1980s and 1990s, by urban planners and geographers such as Gilbert (1989), Schteingart (1989), Ward (1990), Varley (1998) and Connolly (1999), has not been followed by more recent investigation. At the same time, 'development' research has tended to focus on cities in Africa and Asia, and Latin America has been seen as a 'largely forgotten continent ... neither poor enough to attract pity and aid, nor dangerous enough to excite strategic calculation' (Reid 2007: 2). This notwithstanding, there is renewed interest in using a comparative focus to explore the complex social processes which make informal settlements part of the city (e.g. Huchzermeyer 2004b; McFarlane 2008); and in undertaking critical research exploring the relation between discourses and the marginalised areas they seek to describe, in the context of Latin American cities (e.g. Everett 2001; Kellett 2002; Jones 2004; Varley 2008). This thesis hopes to add to these debates, through exploring the interactions between marginalising discourses and urban informal settlements, a point which is returned to later in this chapter, and in the conclusion to this thesis.

This section has located some of the key issues relating to the marginalisation of urban informal settlements, and why this is seen as a problem. The next section turns to the potential effects that discourses may have within this context.

1.2 Marginalising discourses

Alongside the more obvious consequences of spatial marginalisation for urban informal settlements and their residents, social marginalisation may lead to the perception of neighbourhoods as socially disorganised. For example, in Bogotá, Colombia,

‘[t]he technical, apparently neutral language of government planning has variously described the barrios as “clandestine”, “sub-normal”, or “spontaneous”, leading to them being portrayed by government and media as temporary, worthless or invisible’ (Everett 2001: 458).

Stereotyping of places in local and national discourses as ‘rough’ and dangerous can have very real consequences, such as non-residents’ physical avoidance of these neighbourhoods, which further contribute to their spatial isolation, stigmatisation and exclusion (Morrison 2003: 145). Such exaggerated and crude labelling has the effect of denying legitimacy to places, obscuring the fact that they contain social processes that reflect (and interconnect with) those of the ‘formal’ city (Hughes 1980 in Mooney 1999: 99), and that they may have their own internal logic. This labelling can be seen as a form of discursive marginalisation, comparable to the way that in Britain, the ‘council estate’ has become a by-word for crime and disorder, a symbol of modern urban social problems (Mooney 1999: 71).

In fact, it has been suggested that ‘discourse is an important investigative object to understand the process of marginalisation’ (Wilson and Bauder 2001: 260). Discourses are implicated in the construction of marginalisation as ‘[t]hese tales of reality ... are core ingredients in processes that marginalise’ (Wilson and Bauder 2001: 259). Here, discourse is taken to mean collections of words, meanings and images, projected as stories of ‘reality’ with potentially powerful effects. In academic and policy fields, discursive marginalisation may occur through the exclusion of certain perspectives or narratives, as well as through persistent negative interpretations of places and people.

Relating to negative characterisations of urban informal settlements, observers have highlighted the resurgent use of the term ‘slum’ (e.g. UN-Habitat 2003; Davis 2006), and seen this as evidence of a worrying trend towards a generally negative and over-simplified universal image of informal settlements (Gilbert 2007: 698; see also Varley 2008). The reproduction of terms like ‘slum’ or ‘squatter’ (e.g. Neuwirth 2005), indiscriminately applied to all places and people under the ‘informal’ heading, obscures diversity and complexity. Indeed, it has been suggested that two parallel urban histories exist – the official history and the other, that of low-income urban groups – meaning that

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

In fact, despite decades of research suggesting that ‘formal’ and ‘informal’ sectors are interconnected (e.g. Bromley 1978; Moser 1994; Ward 2004), there is a continued emphasis in academic and policy discourses on the division between the ‘formal’ and ‘informal’ city. This has meant that urban informal settlements are often treated as outside ‘normal’ urban considerations (Roy 2005); and this dualistic perception frequently entails a normative view of ‘informal’ sectors and areas as separate from, and inferior to, those of the ‘formal’ city. This may be based on the enduring influence of discourses of modernity, which have tended to conceptualise cities in binary terms such as ‘modern/traditional’ and ‘urban/rural’ (Robinson 2006), as well as clarifying them in terms of crude quantitative measures. As a result, in housing and planning debates, policy makers have often failed to understand what life is like for the poor (Devas and Rakodi 1993).

Moreover, such discourses may have material effects through their reification³ in urban policy. For example, the discursive marginalisation of urban informal settlements may be used to justify policies with negative outcomes for residents, such as displacement, eviction and withholding investment. The physical or spatial layout of urban informal settlements,

³ Reification refers to the notion of treating an abstraction as if it were a thing (Shurmer-Smith 2002: 4).

often portrayed as 'unplanned' and disorderly, may be used as a pretext to justify redevelopment of settlements by the authorities, on health and safety grounds. In South Africa, the Slums Act of 2007 has been used to justify the demolition of 'slum' settlements and the displacement of their (mostly black) populations (Hadland 2008; Kane-Berman 2008), despite being fiercely resisted by grassroots organisations such as Abahlali baseMjondolo, who claim the legislation is unconstitutional and anti-poor (Huchzermeyer 2007; Abahlali 2009). Mass evictions from slums and squatter settlements have also occurred in Zimbabwe in 2005, and in Nigeria in 2006 (Huchzermeyer 2007), as well as more recently in the latter (Rolnik 2009). Evictions in Mumbai, which are a regular occurrence, have also recently been highlighted in the international media (e.g. BBC 2009; Pinglay 2009).

In Latin American cities, where eradication and eviction are generally less common, marginalisation may be socially and spatially reinforced, as seen by recent plans to build walls around *favelas* in Rio de Janeiro (Phillips 2009). During my research in Mexico, news coverage revealed several instances of expropriation, eviction and demolition of '*barrios bravos*' ('rough neighbourhoods') in Mexico City, based on justifications including the protection of green areas (Santos 2007) and combating organised crime (Marín 2007; Martínez 2007). Even where the threat of eviction is less common, political manipulation of housing need has long constituted an important part of statecraft in many cities of Latin America (Ward 1999), based on clientelism and corruption.

Marginalising discourses also have the effect of undermining the collective effort that goes into constructing urban informal settlements, which are often built partially or wholly by their residents. As Huchzermeyer (2004a: 343) has argued, an informal settlement is not simply a collection of individual households that have found a solution to their individual housing need, but a collective effort to secure access to land and shelter. Indeed, many informal settlements are planned, albeit not conventionally (Imparato and Rusler 2003). Gilbert (1994: 86-7) describes how the process of land invasion, despite appearing chaotic, involves a high degree of organisation and forward planning, marshalling settler families and determining who will take which lots and how the streets will be laid out. However,

this organisation and planning frequently goes unrecognised in accounts which focus on these places' negative aspects.

Even within urban informal settlements, this collective effort is often devalued or unacknowledged. As long ago as 1967, Mangin (1967: 85) commented on the apparent disjuncture between the visible accomplishments of settlers, and their view of their own capacities:

'A somewhat puzzling factor must be noted in these populations that have achieved so much. Despite their own problem-solving efforts they seem to believe that the only answer to their problems lies in outside solutions from the government, the United States, the United Nations, etc. This is also the assumption of practically every governmental report I have read on squatter settlements. We asked our sample in a Lima *barriada* how the problems of the *barrio* could be solved. Only 11 of more than 70 replied that they could do anything to solve their own problems. In the sample were heads of families, many of whom had taken part in the invasion and were at the time active in the local association working on water, sewage disposal, and legal problems'.

Mangin (1967) suggested that this lack of recognition may derive from traditional economists' difficulty in evaluating the economic contribution of settlements. Alternatively, it may be that lack of societal or official recognition has negative effects on the views of the residents themselves, which can lead people to devalue their own achievements (Cameron and Gibson 2005).

In particular, Robinson (2006) has suggested that two of the key disciplinary fields concerned with cities, urban studies and development, have failed to understand urban issues in the global South on the basis of their fixation with 'modern' Western cities. She argues that while urban studies assigns cities to irrelevance on the basis of hierarchical economic rankings, development associates them with their most marginalised parts. As an alternative to these modes of understanding, Robinson (2002: 542) proposes viewing cities as 'ordinary', in order to understand them as 'diverse, creative, modern and distinctive', an idea that is taken up in later chapters of this thesis. In this way, imagining (or re-imagining) the city becomes part of an emancipatory move towards incorporating diverse viewpoints

and experiences of urban life within narratives of place. Understanding cities through their collective imagining may open space for debates about the multiple qualities of places, and how people experience them differently, with greater potential to reflect the diversity and complexity of urban life (Healey 2002). In fact, it may be through emphasising 'alternative imaginations and practices' that dominant understandings of the city are unsettled (Sandercock 2003: 220).

In the spirit of these endeavours to reimagine the city, this thesis explores the spatial and social construction of place in the context of urban informal settlements, in order to reveal the lack of understanding entailed by marginalising discourses, as discussed in this section. One way of imagining urban informal settlements differently is by attempting to see them as ordinary places.

1.3 Unsettling binaries and ordinary places

Robinson's (2006) assertion that the Western focus on modernity has obscured the potential of 'Third World' cities resonates with Escobar's (1995: 3-10) suggestion that developmentalism represents an attempt to transform the 'underdeveloped' world in the name of economic progress, based on the Western knowledge system and Enlightenment ideals of modernity. Postdevelopment theorists have suggested that this monocultural approach should be replaced with ecologies of knowledges which 'disclose, and give credit to the diversity and multiplicity of social practices in opposition to the exclusive credibility of hegemonic practices' (Santos 2004 in Gibson-Graham 2005: 5). Focusing on the disqualified and invisible presents the non-credible and non-existent as alternatives to hegemonic experience, in order to 'imagine and practice development differently' (Gibson-Graham 2005: 6).

Similar to enjoinders to reimagine the city, 'postdevelopment' approaches aim to create a discourse of difference by challenging disempowering representations of individuals and communities: for example, focusing not just on the negative or deficient elements of a

place, but also its positive aspects. This may mean going beyond traditional economic or quantitative indicators, to look for new ways of evaluating informal production, such as focusing on the activities and processes that ‘actively make and share a *commons*’ (Gibson-Graham 2005: 16). This perspective suggests an emphasis on elements of collective endeavour often found in urban informal settlements, as well as a shift of evaluative focus from economic, quantitative measurements, to one that incorporates social and other processes.

In the spirit of a postdevelopment approach, my research deliberately privileges spatial, social, cultural and political concerns above overtly economic ones, in the context of urban informal settlements. There is a wealth of material on the economic causes and effects of informality (e.g. Bromley 1978; Rakowski 1994a; LARR 2004; Perry et al. 2007), which has been extensively critiqued elsewhere. But urban informal settlements are social places (Huchzermeyer 2004b): whether viewed in the context of the city, or in their own right, they are complex and pluralistic places, in which social, cultural and political activities occur. Without the city these places would not exist; but they also fulfil multiple functions within the city. To acknowledge this is to attempt to move beyond existing conceptions of informal settlements as separate from the ‘formal’ city, in order to recognise their right to exist, but also their creative capacity and contribution to the city, in social, political and cultural terms.

This approach attempts to overcome simplified understandings by understanding and capturing complex phenomena and processes. In this way, it resonates with Kusmer’s (1997: 709) assertion that social scientists have a duty to explore complexity (in the context of discussing Wacquant’s critique of the African-American ‘ghetto’):

‘Although social scientists are not responsible for the simplifying or misuse of their theories, they can do their part by eschewing a narrow conceptualization of the ghetto that focuses only on the most wretched denizens of the inner city. Now, as in the past, the concept of disorganization, when applied even to the poorest groups, obscures much because it defines its subject entirely in negative terms. ... Without ignoring the vicious conditions of ghetto housing projects, we have an obligation to present the black community in all its human complexity.’

Neither poverty nor racism is limited to the inner city; conversely, the inner city is not simply a study in poverty and racism’.

Applying this approach in the context of informal settlements means aiming to present them in their complexity. For example, it means recognising that poverty and disorder are not limited to these places; nor are they simply a study in poverty and disorder. Instead, they are places where people live, which may be perceived as under construction or in process, within the wider context of the city.

My research, then, aims to critically examine marginalising discourses of urban informal settlements, through an approach which draws on critical social geographic conceptions of ‘place’ as a socio-spatial construct. Seeing urban informal settlements as *places* enables a focus on their complex nature and the social processes which contribute to this. A place-based approach seeks to avoid the simplistic binary view of ‘formal’ and ‘informal’; and it facilitates understanding of informal settlements, not in isolation but as part of cities in all their complexity. In this way, ‘place’ has the capacity to emphasise the experiential, perceptual dimension of urban informal settlements, and may help to unsettle marginalising discourses.

To this end, ‘place-making’ is employed as an analytical lens. Place-making is seen as the construction of place, by a variety of different actors and means, which may be discursive and political, but also small-scale, social, spatial and cultural. It is used here to capture the messy, dynamic and contextualised processes which construct urban informal settlements. Place-making offers potential to understand certain qualities of urban informal settlements differently, revealing the simplified understandings perpetuated by marginalising discourses. It is therefore a means to critically understand the power of discourses, but also to suggest that there is room for resistance to these.

In this way, a place-making approach seems to fulfil the objectives discussed in this section, namely: unsettling binaries; emphasising social (rather than economic) concerns;

and exploring complexity. This approach was employed in the research setting of Mexico, which is briefly introduced in the next section.

1.4 Urban informal settlements in Mexico

Mexico offers fertile ground to explore issues around urban informal settlements. Situated between the United States and Latin America, it is increasingly considered part of North rather than Central America. At the national level, Mexico is currently undergoing several complex and long-term transitions, including deeper integration into the international economy, and deepening social and political democratisation, entailing administrative decentralisation. However, it is reflective of much of Latin America, in terms of high levels of inequality, middle-income status and high levels of urbanisation (Gilbert and Crankshaw 1999). Economic crisis in the 1980s, caused by debt crisis and structural adjustment, was followed by the devaluation of the peso in the 1990s (Heritage 2004), resulting in increased inequality and a decline in living standards for much of the population (Graizbord and Aguilar 2006: 92). Of Mexico's population of 106 million, more than 40 per cent are below the poverty line (Graizbord and Aguilar 2006: 92). Despite having the most extensive and long-running land tenure regularisation programme in the world, around 50 per cent of Mexico's urban dwellers live in areas with informal origins, known as *colonias populares*.

Colonias populares are low-income, self-built neighbourhoods which conform with many of the characteristics of urban informal settlements outlined above. In his comparative study of borderland neighbourhoods in Texas and northern Mexico, Ward (1999: 1) outlines some of the salient aspects of these neighbourhoods in Mexico:

'[C]olonias are important low-income housing areas, the principal characteristics of which are cheaply acquired land, inadequate infrastructure, and self-help dwelling construction. But despite the enormous social costs associated with living and raising a family under these conditions, colonias are home for a large number of people – indeed, in Mexico, for the majority of the population in cities. Fortunately, the physical conditions in colonias improve over time. They are, in the words of one author, "Slums of hope" (Lloyd 1979), such that between fifteen and twenty years after their establishment they have often become integrated working-class districts with paved roads, services

installed, and consolidated dwellings, many with two stories. They are, then, both a problem and a solution – at least if one takes a long-term perspective’.

So *colonias* in Mexico have comparatively good prospects for upgrading and gradual physical integration into the city (Ward 1999: 4). Development processes in *colonias* are often conceptualised as ‘consolidation’, an idea which emphasises improvements in legality, security of tenure, services and housing (e.g. Gough and Kellett 2001).

The highly politicised nature of low-income housing in Mexico means that settlers and developers play an important role in local, state and national political processes (Ward 1999). Furthermore, alongside spatial development, complex, intangible and non-linear processes occur, relating to social networks, power relations and politics. To gather information on place-making in this context, I used a qualitative methodology in two case study *colonias populares* in Xalapa, the provincial city where my research took place. The selection of a medium-sized city as the research setting was a deliberate choice. Although Latin American cities are often characterised by primacy, meaning that they contain many more residents than the next largest (Gilbert 1994), it can be misleading to focus on large cities. In most regions of the world more than half the urban population live in urban cities with less than half a million inhabitants (Mitlin and Satterthwaite 2004; UN-Habitat 2006), and medium-sized cities are as subject to rapid urbanisation as megacities (Davis 2004), making them a particularly pertinent object of study.

This short section has briefly outlined some of the main considerations of the research setting of *colonias populares* in Mexico. As outlined in the preceding sections, my research seeks to contribute to debates taking a critical approach to exploring relations between discourses and their marginalised objects (people or places); and in the spirit of ‘postdevelopment’, looks beyond economic concerns to interrogate social and other aspects of marginalisation. Informing the discussions in the chapters that follow, these objectives are also returned to in the conclusion of this thesis. The next and final section of this chapter gives a brief elaboration of the thesis structure.

1.5 Thesis structure

The research aim outlined in the preceding sections is based on a critique of discourses around informality, related to ‘formal/informal’ dualistic perceptions of the city, as set out in Chapter Two, ‘Constructing Informality: A Critique’. The chapter discusses how urban informal settlements are problematised in academic and policy discourses. A review of key debates on urban informal settlements from the 1960s to date reveals that they can be broadly divided into two tendencies: structuralist and legalist (Rakowski 1994b). However, both tendencies rest on a ‘formal/informal’ dualism, which isolates informal settlements rather than contextualising them within the city (Roy 2005). As an alternative, conceptions of urban informal settlements that emphasise the complex and intricate nature of informality as process, and the ‘everyday nature of informality’, are discussed.

Based on this critique, in Chapter Three, ‘Urban Informal Settlements: Ordinary Places?’, ‘place-making’ is suggested as an alternative theoretical lens through which to understand urban informal settlements. Rather than understanding such settlements in binary terms, they can be understood as places in their own right, and as places within the city. Ideas about ‘place’ from critical social geography emphasise the importance of its social content. Phenomenological approaches to place highlight its human dimension through a focus on lived experience, while social constructionist approaches tend to focus on issues of power, and the dynamic qualities of place. ‘Place-making’ synthesises these approaches, in order to apply them in the context of urban informal settlements.

Colonias populares, the empirical setting for exploring these issues, are discussed in Chapter Four, ‘Urban Informal Settlements in Mexico’. Macro-level processes such as neoliberalisation, democratisation and decentralisation have shaped Mexico’s urban landscape, where high levels of informal development are underpinned by inadequate housing provision and dynamic rural land markets. At the local level in Xalapa, the city where the two case studies are located, specific factors such as regional economies and powerful landholding interests have affected *colonia* development. Introducing the two

case studies, the discussion highlights particular salient issues in this context, and areas where gaps in existing knowledge relate to the specific research concerns.

In this setting, information to answer the research questions was gathered using qualitative, ethnographic methods, presented in Chapter Five, 'Methodology'. This was felt to be most suitable to the study's focus on processes which contribute to the spatial and social construction of place. Within a case study framework, methods such as interviews, participant observation, solicited photography and focus groups were used. Doing research in an intercultural setting requires awareness of particular issues relating to language, culture and ethics, and these are discussed in the light of their implications for broader debates.

Chapter Six, 'Making Ordinary Places', is the first of three analytical chapters which explore the research findings. The chapter examines discursive constructions of *colonias populares* in the city of Xalapa, based on the views of various 'outsiders' to the case study *colonias*, and compares this with their residents' perceptions, in order to examine the residents' lived experience of the effects of discourses. The discursive construction of *colonias populares* in Xalapa is complex and often contradictory: they are discursively constructed as 'other' or separate from the city, in line with dualistic theories, but this 'othering' also takes place within these neighbourhoods, suggesting the power of these discourses. They may have potentially marginalising effects on places and people, through the reification of ideas (for example in local policy); but residents also resist these marginalising constructions, suggesting a context of complex power relations.

Chapter Seven, 'Entanglements of Power', takes a concrete example of discursive place-making, the Xalapa Municipal Government's Citizen Participation policy, to explore the material effects of these discursive constructions. An analysis of the Citizen Participation Bylaw, which seems to apply particularly to residents of *colonias populares*, reveals certain underlying values and politics. A comparison of the framework for citizen participation with *colonia* residents' experiences shows how policy can influence and shape places, while also being interpreted and contested in certain ways by their residents. Looking

beyond Citizen Participation, ‘unofficial’ place-making strategies are employed in and around *colonias populares* by residents and other political actors. The complexity of these strategies and the power relations which contextualise them suggests that simplistic views of ‘the state’ versus ‘the community’ are inadequate. Seeing *colonias populares* as sites of complex entanglements of power allows for a more nuanced understanding of the multiple influences involved in the spatial and social construction of these places, including residents’ own actions.

Chapter Eight, ‘A Place in the City’, focuses on residents’ place-making activities in *colonias populares*. Spatial, social and cultural place-making processes, which include everyday, small-scale activities, emphasise both the complexity and the ‘ordinariness’ of these neighbourhoods, as well as highlighting residents’ constructive efforts, which often go unrecognised or undervalued. Residents’ place-making activities can be seen as a form of resistance: not in opposition to a monolithic dominating power, but rather to ideas which circulate about these places. In particular, these activities express residents’ agency, which is often obscured by negative portrayals in academic and policy discourses; and through the construction of place meaning, such activities resist the marginalising effects of certain discourses. Taking a perspective on *colonias populares* as ‘places in process’ offers an alternative to binary conceptions based on discourses of ‘informality’, and their marginalising, ‘othering’ effects.

Finally, Chapter Nine presents a conclusion to the thesis. Returning to the themes outlined in this introductory chapter, it explores the implications of the preceding analysis for understandings of urban informal settlements. Binary constructions of the ‘formal/informal’ city seem to have pervasive influence, as they are reproduced in local discourses, with the potential to reinforce existing marginalisation. However, the complexity of specific relations and processes at the local level, in contrast to somewhat homogenising discourses, suggests that these constructions are limiting in their analysis of urban informal settlements. It is suggested that a more nuanced understanding of these places is needed, which accounts for social processes and creative complexity, as well as technical and legal considerations. Place-making allows a view of the multiple influences and factors involved in the

discursive, spatial, social, cultural and political construction of urban informal settlements, instead of seeing them as different or problematic in relation to the 'formal' city. The chapter closes with a reflection on these conceptual issues, and some suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER 2: CONSTRUCTING INFORMALITY: A CRITIQUE

The Western urban planner sees Texaco as a tumor on the urban order. Incoherent. Insalubrious. A dynamic contestation. A threat. It is denied any architectural or social value. Political discourse negates it. In other words, it is a *problem*.

Patrick Chamoiseau *Texaco* (1998: 269)

Introduction

In the above quotation from his flamboyant novel *Texaco*, about a Creole shantytown of the same name, Patrick Chamoiseau pinpoints the defining characteristic of urban informal settlements according to 'official' perspectives: they are a problem. The 'problematization'⁴ of urban informal settlements derives partly from the way they are described and represented in relevant debates. Policy and academic discourses have tended to conceptualise urban informal settlements in certain ways which have resulted in them being seen as separate from 'normal' urban concerns, with consequent material and social effects, including isolation and stigmatisation. These places thus suffer from discursive as well as social and spatial marginalisation. The marginalisation of urban informal settlements is a problem, both for residents of these places, for whom it can have detrimental material effects, and for the city as a whole, which is deprived of a potentially important input into its collective capacity.

As the first of two chapters outlining the theoretical framework for the research, Chapter Two discusses the construction of urban informal settlements in academic and policy discourses. It offers a critique of some particularly influential theories, which have had discernible effects on policy and practice relating to informal settlements. Across the social sciences, a broad range of disciplinary fields have been concerned with urban informal settlements: of these, urban studies, development and urban planning are drawn on here, and also (to a lesser degree) anthropology and sociology. Some alternative ways of understanding *colonias populares* are explored, based on ideas from social and cultural

⁴ The process of 'problematization' has been defined as 'how and why certain things (behavior, phenomena, processes) become a *problem*. Why, for example, certain forms of behavior were characterized as "madness" while other similar forms were completely neglected at a given moment' (Foucault 2000 in Cochrane 2007: 2). As Cochrane points out, the same question could be asked of urban problems.

geography. This theme is continued in the following chapter, which explores ideas around 'place' as an alternative analytical framework for understanding urban informal settlements.

This chapter is divided into three sections. In order to understand how and why they are portrayed in a particular way, some key debates on urban informal settlements are explored in the first section. A framework for interpreting these debates is suggested: two tendencies – structuralist and legalist (or 'heroic') – are identified, underpinned by basic philosophical differences in their views of the state and the potential for social change. These tendencies are discussed in the second section, and some criticisms of each are considered: most importantly, both assume a 'formal/informal' dualism, which isolates informal settlements rather than contextualising them within the city. Instead, it is suggested that alternative conceptions of urban informal settlements which build on and challenge these dualistic discourses, emphasising the complex and intricate nature of informality, may be more appropriate. Some of these are explored in the third section.

2.1 Locating the debates

This section presents a review of debates on urban informal settlements since the 1960s, focusing on the interaction between academic and policy discourses, and how and why urban informal settlements are seen as a specific sort of 'problem'.

Framing the 'problem' of urban informal settlements

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

world's urban population, as more than half live in cities of fewer than 500,000 inhabitants, and one-fifth in cities of between one and five million (UN-Habitat 2006: viii).

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

The price of this new urban order is increasing inequalities within and between cities (Davis 2006). Although cities are the main motors of economic growth, and in general, urban populations have better access to services, there is evidence that urban poverty is becoming as severe as rural poverty, as informal settlement residents do not benefit from the advantages of living in the city (UN-Habitat 2006). Incidence of disease and mortality is higher in 'slums' than in other urban areas, although this is often not reflected in national statistics, which mask urban deprivation (UN-Habitat 2006). Informal settlements, then, are seen not only as 'a manifestation of poor housing standards, lack of basic services and denial of human rights, [but] also a symptom of dysfunctional urban societies where inequalities are not only tolerated, but allowed to fester' (UN-Habitat 2006: ix). In this view, the increasing spread of urban informal settlements which house large numbers of the urban poor in the low- and middle-income nations of the global South is nothing less than the 'physical and spatial manifestation of urban poverty and intra-city inequality' (UN-Habitat 2003: xxvi). The use of the term 'slum' to highlight this, as seen in the above-cited works and elsewhere (e.g. Verma 2003 and Maier 2005, quoted in Gilbert 2007), can also be found in the vocabulary of NGOs and the media. This is discussed and critiqued in later sections.

Accounts which frame the 'problem' of urban informal settlements in this way leave little doubt as to their massive scale, not to mention the extreme inequalities they embody, and make a pressing case for action. But it is precisely the issue of what should be done, by whom, and how, about the problem of urban informal settlements (or 'slums', 'irregular settlements', '*favelas*', and so on), that has exercised academics and policy makers since these 'dysfunctional' urban patterns were first perceived. As the above accounts show, some of the most prominent depictions of urban informal settlements have tended to conceptualise them in overridingly negative terms. This is hardly surprising given the very real inequalities and injustices that occur daily in these settings, and the fact that such accounts of informality are frequently motivated by an underlying ideological concern with social justice. However, ideological constructions of informal settlements may lack an understanding of the more prosaic or micro-level processes involved in making these places. Furthermore, the 'problematization' of urban informal settlements may play a contributing role in maintaining the unfavourable conditions in which they exist. The uncritical use of terms such as 'slum' and 'squatter' may lead to their reproduction in the service of policies which directly harm urban residents. I argue here that the interaction of academic and policy discourses in problematising urban informal settlements has led to the continued dominance of particular narratives, containing some problematic assumptions.

Following Foucault, post-structuralists have convincingly argued that '[t]he production and circulation of discourses is an integral component of the exercise of power' (Escobar 1988: 430). Here, discourses are understood as collections of words, meanings and images, integrated into coherent stories and projected as truths about the world (Wagner-Pacifici 1996 in Wilson and Bauder 2001: 259). The power dimension of discourses lies in the fact that 'language constitutes or produces the concepts and categories we use to make sense of the world' (Hastings 1999: 10). Academic discourses can be identified as key sources of ideology and imaginings about, as well as descriptions of, informal settlements. In this way, they harbour the potential to have material effects. In particular, academic interpretations have the potential to influence policy responses, as part of a wide range of multiple and sometimes conflicting understandings which are mobilised in the complex, political process of making urban policy (Cochrane 2007: 141). As Cochrane points out, 'Urban policy is

both an expression of contemporary understandings of the urban, of what makes cities what they are, and itself helps to shape those understandings (as well as the cities themselves)' (Cochrane 2007: 13). Indeed, it has been suggested that 'policy-making is a constant discursive struggle' (Fisher and Forester 1993 in Rydin 1999: 467). In a mutually reinforcing relationship whereby dominant narratives, in the form of research and writing about urban informal settlements, influence understanding of and action towards them, academic discourses may have material effects on shaping how these places are seen and even formed. This influence may extend to ideas about place meaning and place imagining, as I argue below with relation to discourses of 'informality'.

A brief history of discourses of 'informality'

The identification of an 'informal sector' is often traced to Hart's (1973) distinction between formal and informal economic sectors, based on types of employment. The International Labour Organisation in the 1970s adopted the informal sector concept to describe 'small-scale activities, largely escaping recognition, enumeration, regulation or government protection' (Moser 1994: 15). The informal sector is normally seen as constituting one half of a dualistic framework, in opposition to the large-scale, regulated, 'modern', formal sector. This dichotomy has had enduring influence, shaping subsequent conceptualisations. This is despite the fact that its application to a wide range of data and contexts has resulted in the inclusion of 'heterogeneous sets of activities and people without clearly identifiable or analytically useful common characteristics' within the informal sector (Moser 1994: 16).

In fact, as Ward has pointed out, since the 1970s empirical research into economic marginality has undermined the notion of a separate class of informal workers, suggesting instead that

'[i]f people were poor it was by virtue of their integration, not their exclusion from formal economic activities. ... From the early 1970s onwards, informal sector analyses drew attention to the multiple linkages between the formal and

informal sectors, and to the apparent virtuosity of the latter, and even its capacity for growth' (Ward 2004: 184-5; see also Bromley 1978).

While there is a substantial body of literature devoted to the informal sector debate regarding work and other economic activities (see for example Rakowski 1994a; Perry et al. 2007), here the research focuses on informal settlements.

The origins of informality theory relating to human settlement have been located in the Chicago School's⁵ descriptions of 'Third World' cities undergoing massive urbanisation and high levels of rural-urban migration in the 1950s and 1960s (AlSayyad 2004). 'Urban informals' were a particular type of new city migrant, part of a transformative cycle within a predetermined rural-urban continuum, whose failure to complete this cycle condemned them to marginal status, on the edge of two cultures but members of neither (Abrams 1964). Often they were seen as passive members of a 'culture of poverty', exemplified by 'family disruption, violence, brutality, cheapness of life, lack of love, lack of education, [and] lack of medical facilities', as described by Lewis (1967: xiv) in the slums of Puerto Rico and New York. Despite Lewis' more subtle elaboration in his own work that by 'culture of poverty', he meant a design for living in stability and cohesiveness amid difficult circumstances, the association of this idea with social disorganisation reinforced the orthodox view that 'the informal housing area was by definition a slum, therefore – again by definition – an area of delinquency, breakdown and general social malaise' (Hall 2002: 272-4). Here inhabitants could be found '[l]iving almost like animals ... overwhelmed by animality', a situation which gave rise to the 'solutions' of eradication and displacement (Schulman 1966 in Mangin 1967).

In the 1960s and 1970s, this dominant paradigm of marginality was challenged by a variety of researchers (e.g. Mangin 1967; Turner 1968; Peattie 1970; Lomnitz 1977; Castells 1979; Lloyd 1979), whose work was often characterised by ethnographic methods in Latin American 'slum' neighbourhoods. Perlman's 'The Myth of Marginality' (1976) was

⁵ The Chicago School, founded by Robert Park in the early twentieth century, represented 'the first systematic effort to theorize the study of community and urbanism' (AlSayyad 2004: 8). It has been described as a school of culturalists, from where the origins of urban sociology 'as a science of the new forms of life appearing in the great metropolises' derive (Castells 1979: 76).

particularly influential. Marginality, she argued, served in Brazil and across Latin America as 'both a myth and a description of social reality' (Perlman 1976: 242). Contrary to the popular view of the urban poor living in shantytowns characterised by social disorganisation and radical politics, she found that *favela* dwellers were socially well-organised and cohesive, culturally optimistic with aspirations for their children's education and their housing, economically hard-working, and politically neither apathetic nor radical: 'In short, *they have the aspirations of the bourgeoisie, the perseverance of pioneers, and the values of patriots*. What they do *not* have is an opportunity to fulfill their aspirations' (Perlman 1976: 242-3, original emphasis). The high degree of interaction of informal settlement residents with the cities in which they were based, for jobs, marketing, schools and associational ties, was also emphasised (Mangin 1967: 80).

In fact, it was argued, the myth of marginality was used for the social control of the poor, who far from being marginal, were integrated into society 'on terms that often caused them to be economically exploited, politically repressed, socially stigmatized and culturally excluded' (Bayat 2000 in AlSayyad 2004: 9; see also Castells 1983). Perlman (1976: 247) suggested that social science mirrors social ideology or 'common sense' in a closed circle of social theory, which lends legitimacy to policy-makers informed by a world view which corresponds with prevailing prejudices. The 'myth' then becomes a real material force: 'an ideology which informs the practice of the dominant classes ... a vehicle for interpreting the social reality in a form which serves the social interests of those in power' (Perlman 1976: 247). In this way, the interaction of policy and academic discourses on informality was seen as reinforcing the dominant ideology and narrative of marginality.

Also during the 1960s and 1970s, the concept of 'self-help' was developed, reinforced by Perlman's research, as well as that of others such as Frieden in Mexico City (Hall 2002). While exact definitions of 'self-help' have remained consistently elusive (see for example Burgess 1978; Romero 2003), the term broadly refers to housing where the owner-occupier constructs some or all of the accommodation, with or without (professional) help. This may be as much or as little as procuring the local bricklayer's services, or getting advice from friends and family (Gilbert 1994). Turner (1968, 1972) was among the first to suggest that

dweller control in housing was important. The lack of government will, resources, and flexibility to provide the right kind of shelter, combined with a great potential resource in the desire, energy and initiative of families to house themselves, led to a prescription of 'greater user autonomy in the provision of housing' (Turner and Fichter 1972: xi). Seeing 'housing as a verb' or a multi-staged process, rather than as a commodity or noun, would relocate the focus of housing provision onto the user, thereby reclaiming housing as a vehicle for personal fulfilment.

Households should therefore be given the 'freedom to build' within the parameters of their multiple needs, broadly identified as identity, opportunity and security (which could evolve and change over time). The role of the state would be to facilitate a network of discrete services to respond to housing demand (Turner 1972: 165). In a similar vein, Mangin (1967: 85) challenged the standard myths surrounding informal settlements and suggested that rather than a problem, they constituted a solution to the complex and problematic combination of rapid urbanisation, migration and housing shortage which existed in many Latin American cities. Given the failure of eviction and displacement policies to resolve informal development, governments needed to recognise that 'city growth and the squatter settlements are permanent developments' (Mangin 1967: 89), and to provide cheap land and services for households in need, alongside rehabilitating existing settlements.

The idea of 'self-help' had important implications for policy, as international agencies and national governments came to accept the idea that self-help housing could be a solution rather than a problem. As a result, sites-and-services and upgrading policies were implemented in many countries during the late 1960s and early 1970s (Moser and Peake 1987: 4). The widespread adoption of the idea in policy terms, particularly by international agencies, meant that improving rather than replacing informal settlements became the priority for intervention (Davis 2006). This generated considerable debate and criticism. In particular, Ward (1982) attacked the double exploitation of labour (at work and in housing construction) which subsidised wage costs, on the basis that 'access to low-cost shelter reduces the wage level required for subsistence' (Moser and Peake 1987: 5). Far from being a choice, 'freedom to build' was actually the only housing option for many, involving

suffering and appalling living conditions (Burgess 1978). It was further suggested that 'self-help releases government from its responsibility to provide adequate housing as a basic need for its low-income population' (Moser and Peake 1987: 5). Ward (1982) suggested that the idea merited closer scrutiny on the basis of its ideological implications as a means of social control, through the incorporation of residents into society, for example as part of the tax base. Furthermore, its success indicated it represented an attractive alternative housing policy for different groups with specific interests, not all of them aligned with those of the poor (Ward 1982).

These criticisms were underpinned by the question of whether improved conditions for the majority of the working population could be achieved without fundamental redistribution of wealth (Ward 1982). They prompted Turner, in his defence, to refine some of his concepts (e.g. Turner 1978), and to argue that he supported collective, rather than individual self-help efforts (Gilbert 1994: 99). But as Davis (2006: 71-2) has pointed out,

'[d]espite its radical provenance, Turner's core program of self-help, incremental construction, and legalization of spontaneous urbanization was exactly the kind of pragmatic, cost-effective approach to the urban crisis that [the World Bank] favored'.

'Self-help' arguably heralded a new era of the privatisation of housing supply, championed by the World Bank. This was given economic viability by De Soto's idea of 'micro-entrepreneurial solutions to urban poverty', paving the way for the withdrawal of government support (Davis 2006: 71-2). Indeed, De Soto has been called '[a] John Turner for the 1990s' (Davis 2006: 79).

According to De Soto (2000), provision of legal titles is the solution to informality, and indeed the means to unlocking the potential for wealth creation by the poor. His argument is that creating property ownership (through titling) and legalisation of their assets would give poor people the security of tenure they need to invest in their homes and businesses, and hence invigorate the economy. De Soto's proposals for large-scale regularisation of informal housing in developing countries have been extremely influential, as 'an increasing

number of countries and cities ... have introduced regularisation policies based on his ideas', affecting the lives of millions of people (Fernandes 2002: 5-6). Particularly in Latin America, evictions and removals of the 1970s have been replaced by relative tolerance of illegal tenure developments, and in some cases formal regularisation programmes, with the dual objectives of recognising security of tenure and promoting the integration of informal communities into society (Fernandes 2002: 5).

Fernandes locates the appeal of De Soto's analysis in his emphasis on the economic dimension of urban illegality, and in particular, the estimated \$9.3 trillion of 'dead capital' held in small informal businesses and precarious housing – which has been described as a 'highly unlikely' figure (Fernandes 2002: 6). De Soto's prescriptions have also been criticised for their political usage, and the fact that mass formalisation policies have not resulted in the expected wealth creation (Miranda 2002). It has been argued that De Soto oversimplified the complex role of property in (for example) Latin America, where urban illegality is produced by a combination of land markets, political systems and 'the elitist and exclusionary legal systems still prevailing' (Fernandes 2002: 7).

Current debates on urban informal settlements

The debates outlined above have arguably constituted the precursors of current theories which focus on the effects of global developments in an era of neoliberalism. More recently theorists have located the causes of urban informality in the supposed 'liberalisation' of cities, as one of the consequences of globalisation⁶ (AlSayyad 2004). In this view, increased informality is an indirect component and consequence of globalisation, based on the massive urbanisation it has engendered (Lepofsky and Fraser 2003). Urbanisation

⁶ Globalisation is an ambiguous term which has been defined, somewhat uncritically, as 'an increased international integration of economic systems' (Munck 2003: 57). In more critical detail, it has been seen as 'the spatial reorganization of production, the interpenetration of industries across borders, the spread of financial markets, the diffusion of identical consumer goods to distant countries, massive transfers of population within the South as well as from the South and the East to the West, resultant conflicts between immigrant and established communities in formerly tight-knit neighbourhoods, and an emerging worldwide preference for democracy' (Mittelman 1994 in Gilbert 1998: 181-2). Based on this, Gilbert concludes that 'if globalization means anything, it is that life in one part of the world is heavily influenced by events elsewhere' (Gilbert 1998: 182).

occurs in order to produce specific spatial structures and forms supporting the (re)creation of the social relations necessary for the reproduction of capital (Castells 1998: 164-5). In other words, the twin forces of globalisation and urbanisation are creating new city forms on a global scale, characterised by flexible capital accumulation and globalised information networks (Douglass 1998). Ordinary urban dwellers are marginalised and powerless in the face of mobile capital, and there exists a new geography of social exclusion 'made up of multiple black holes ... throughout the planet': American inner-city ghettos, French *banlieues* and Asian mega-cities' shantytowns (Castells 1998: 164-5).

This concurs with an influential strand of recent academic thinking which frames urban informal settlements as a manifestation of urban crisis. For example, Davis (2006: 200-1) sees 'slums' as 'a fully franchised solution to the problem of warehousing this century's surplus humanity', in a world where exclusion occurs at local, national and global levels. He locates the cause of urban informal settlements primarily with the imposition of Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) in the 1980s by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, which made life unsustainable for millions of rural poor, forcing them to move to cities, with resultant explosive urbanisation (Davis 2006: 15-7). Davis declares somewhat ironically that slums have a 'brilliant future', as the unequal growth caused by SAPs narrows the available options for housing the 'millions of traditional urbanites displaced or immiserated by the violence of "adjustment"', as well as poor rural migrants (Davis 2006: 151-2). In this way, 'cities have become a dumping ground for a surplus population working in unskilled, unprotected and low-wage informal service industries and trade' (UN-Habitat 2003 in Davis 2006: 175).

The discursive 'return of the slum' in the vocabulary of international agencies and commentators has been part of an attempt to show the seriousness of the urban situation in the global South (Gilbert 2007). The term 'slum' is particularly controversial, having been re-introduced into international development discourse since the 1990s (D'Cruz and Satterthwaite 2005). It had previously fallen out of use in this arena due its 'culture of poverty' connotations, following Booth's classic definition of 'slums' in nineteenth century London 'characterised by an amalgam of dilapidated housing, overcrowding, poverty and

vice' (Davis 2004: 12). Some have seen more recent usage of the term, to highlight the real and serious problems of urban informal settlements, as a worrying development: 'because we have always had great difficulty in distinguishing real slums from apparent slums, a generally negative universal image can be dangerous' (Gilbert 2007: 698). It is feared that the discursive resurgence of 'slums', which stereotypes residents and looks to environmental improvements to address poverty, may also provide local authorities with the justification they need for demolition and eradication policies (Gilbert 2007). In the case of South Africa's recent Slums Act, where the UN's 'Cities Without Slums' campaign was used to justify the removal and displacement of residents from informal settlements, this certainly seems to have been the case (Huchzermeyer 2007).

There has also been a recent resurgent interest in 'slums' from urban design and architecture fields, such as celebrations of toilet festivals and 'new slum urbanism' in architectural arenas (e.g. Brillembourg et al. 2005). As Varley (2008: 1) has pointed out, this has been portrayed as 'renewed social and environmental activism'. However, Varley (2008: 4) shares Gilbert's concern that

'analysis of slums invoking "human-made filth" is reminiscent of the beliefs about slums prevailing in nineteenth-century Britain. ... Is there not also a possibility that such strategies might reinforce, rather than disrupt, the negative stereotyping of "slum dwellers"?'.

As both Gilbert and Varley suggest, debates appear to have come full circle. UN-Habitat (2006: ix, 19, 27) justifies the re-categorisation of 'slum' as offering policy makers a workable, operational definition which can be linked to specific, reportable indicators, thus addressing the conceptual and methodological challenges of measuring urban informal settlements. However, this could also contribute to the discursive marginalisation of these settlements, as part of a prevailing tendency to 'other' such areas in the context of the city. As will be seen below, the idea of dividing and quantifying the city according to static categories may be part of the problem as much as the solution.

This section's review of some theories from academic and policy discourses on urban informal settlements has shown several examples of academe-policy interaction, and the potential for this to reinforce problematic assumptions, with possible material effects for urban residents. In order to critically assess these debates, the next section suggests a framework for interpreting them.

2.2 Interpreting the debates

The preceding discussion suggests that theories of informality may reflect and draw on different philosophical or ideological tendencies. This section interrogates the philosophical tendencies underpinning the discourses outlined above, on the basis that this is fundamental to understanding how theories are formulated. In the context of informal sector debates, it has been suggested that one way of making sense of them is by dividing them into two broad tendencies, structuralist and legalist. Theories of urban informal settlements falling under both headings are subject to some criticisms which are also outlined here. Ultimately, the most important contention may be that this body of theory, which has been highly influential in policy and practice, rests on and reproduces a 'formal/informal' dualism which tends to isolate and separate out these places rather than contextualising them within the city.

Ideological underpinnings: structuralists and legalists

In attempts to make sense of informal sector debates, it has been suggested that there are two broad schools of thought within 'informality' theory: structuralists and legalists (Rakowski 1994b; see also AlSayyad 2004). The structuralist school sees informality (and informal settlements) as the result of capitalism's uneven development. In this view, informality is a temporary, marginalised phase of 'underdevelopment', constituted by survival activities of the poor, with the role of the state being to equalise differences (Rakowski 1994b: 31-9). Informal settlements are therefore an aberration, and constitute an infringement of liberal democratic rights (see for example Everett 2001; Huchzermeyer 2004a). Alternatively, some structuralists reject the idea of a 'formal/informal' dichotomy,

seeing the informal sector as an 'underground economy', an essential, permanent component of modern economies closely connected to the formal sector, housing the reserve army of labour (Rakowski 1994b: 36-9). Work on urban informal settlements which could be considered to fall under the 'structuralist' category includes that of Perlman and other critics of marginality, Davis, the authors of the UN-Habitat reports, and critics of self-help.

Structuralist accounts contrast sharply with the more 'heroic' interpretations of those identified by Rakowski as 'legalists', most often exemplified by De Soto (2000), who see informality as an alternative, but rational economic survival strategy. Participants in the informal sector are therefore entrepreneurs, and informality is the result of their reacting against an excessively interventionist, legal, bureaucratic state (Rakowski 1994b: 33). In this view, informal settlements are seen as 'part of a common logic of economic development and labor power reproduction' required to maintain the workforce biologically, through population growth, and socially, through housing (Ward 1999: 5). Informality provides a point of access to the economy for small-scale producers, and wealth created by 'informals' could eventually be a path to development. AlSayyad (2004) points out the influence of the legalist approach, which is compatible with neoliberal perspectives, in development policy, alongside the introduction of new development possibilities based on market mechanisms. This is seen, for example, in the 'hegemony of the International Monetary Fund and the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development', which have promoted trade liberalisation, exchange rate reform, and privatisation, with highly uneven spatial effects (AlSayyad 2004: 13). Regarding work on urban informal settlements, the category of 'legalists' arguably includes exponents of self-help alongside De Soto, as well as those who celebrate informality in 'populist' terms (e.g. Neuwirth 2005), including new slum urbanism writing (Brillembourg et al. 2005).

Rakowski's (1994b) categorisation implicitly refers to wider debates about structure and agency, which require brief explanation here. Since the 1960s, social theories have tended to be characterised according to the relative emphasis they place on agency or structure: in other words, in terms of the 'agency versus structure' debate (Marshall 1998: 10). In

sociological terms, structuralism refers to the idea that underlying structures are discernible beneath the fluctuating and changing appearances of social reality (Marshall 1998). Structures are understood by some to be based on binary oppositions. These structures remain comparatively constant, and it is the relationships between them which produce ideas and social forms, rather than individuals. Agency is usually juxtaposed with structure, and taken to refer to the undetermined nature of human action (as opposed to the deterministic nature of structures).

The structure/agency conflict arose around the 'death of the subject', in other words 'the demise of the idea of individuals acting and choosing voluntarily', to the point where agency is granted to structures instead of individuals (Marshall 1998: 647). Attempts to transcend this dualism include Giddens' structuration (mentioned in more detail in Chapter Three), and Bourdieu's social constructivist approach. This ontological difference is reflected in diverging political positions, centring on key areas of difference such as views of the state's role and the potential for social change. Returning to theories of informality, according to Rakowski (1994b: 33), a 'structuralist' perspective may be associated with neo-Marxist tendencies, while a 'legalist' one tends to be aligned with neoliberal thinking. Both interpretations are open to criticism on a number of different fronts, some of which are outlined below.

Criticisms of structuralist accounts

The structuralist interpretation of informality as the survival strategies of the 'losers' in the capitalist system has led to frequent associations of urban informal settlements with poverty. However, such settlements are not only populated by the urban poor, nor do all urban poor live in informal settlements. Indeed, it has long been noted that urban informality does not equate to urban poverty (Bromley 1978); as has the falsity of spuriously relating independent social, cultural and economic factors in characterisations of 'marginal' residents (Perlman 1976: 244-5). As a 'visible dimension of poverty', housing is an emotive issue; but judgements on housing conditions must also consider local factors, including different cultural, social and environmental conditions (Gilbert and Gugler 1992).

Indeed, it is hard to avoid the fact that any criteria for judging housing are inevitably subjective and ethnocentric (Gilbert and Gugler 1992), dependent on the observer's context. For example, Rao (2006: 228) differentiates between 'works coming out of the South' and 'works about the South'. The structuralist theories of informality discussed here fall mostly into the latter category; their tendency to reduce informal settlements to a manifestation of urban poverty may obscure the fact that as well as 'slums', they are places where people live, and even 'the places we live' (Bendiksen 2008)⁷.

Urban informal settlements may be seen as part of a wider subset of urban poverty experiences; indeed, they may offer a starting point for describing poverty, in terms of capturing the scale of shelter deprivation in cities (UN-Habitat 2006: 26). But this must be contextualised within debates in development discourse over the last 20 years, which have led to the recognition of poverty's multi-dimensional nature, in a shift away from income-defined poverty (Mitlin and Satterthwaite 2004). As well as poor quality housing, the multi-dimensional view of urban poverty includes a number of different aspects such as inadequate income and asset base, inadequate public infrastructure and basic services, limited or no safety net, inadequate protection of rights, voicelessness and powerlessness (Mitlin and Satterthwaite 2004)⁸.

The underlying concern regarding the reduction of informality to poverty follows on from the sociological contention that structuralist views tend to downplay human agency, which seems so fundamental in the construction and constitution of urban informal settlements. In particular, overwhelmingly negative depictions such as those of Davis (2004, 2006) seem to preclude the possibility of hope or resistance in this setting. This is not to romanticise the reality of urban informal settlements, nor to deny the need for an 'honest debate about the daily violence of economic exclusion' (Davis 2006: 202). However, structuralist accounts which reduce informal settlements to one dimension of their complex reality run the risk of dehumanising them, as well as homogenising residents and their experiences, and in this

⁷ This phrase is taken from a book of photography by Jonas Bendiksen, of the interiors of people's dwellings in informal settlements in Caracas, Nairobi, Mumbai and Jakarta, which reveals the effort and attention to detail invested in residents' living spaces, despite often extremely restricted circumstances.

⁸ This echoes earlier conceptualisations of rural poverty as multi-dimensional, relating to political and bureaucratic structures' unwillingness or inability to effectively address deprivation (Chambers 1983).

way overlooking the enormous efforts of residents who construct these places in extremely constrained circumstances.

Indeed, it has been suggested that the idea of the slum has come to serve as shorthand for the dysfunctional landscapes of the Southern city, whereby slums are seen not as population and terrain, but as theory (Rao 2006). This may lead to a theoretical cul-de-sac: for instance, the impressively broad scope and level of detail in Davis' account is combined with a curiously weak prescriptive approach. Attacking all solutions equally, Davis undermines the normative potential his approach could have (Harding 2007). As one reviewer has put it,

'The reader presses on, hoping that there is going to be some answer or solution, but none is forthcoming. Chapter by chapter, the various attempts to improve the lot of the millions of slum-dwellers in the Third World are described and each is found to be flawed at best or a complete regressive failure at worst' (Lever 2009: 1754).

In downplaying or ignoring the agency of the residents, such a perspective risks theoretically disempowering already marginalised residents.

Similar criticisms can be levelled at the reconceptualisation of urban informal settlements as 'slums', as outlined in the previous section. Such conceptualisations seem to resonate with a view of these places as 'disorderly' (Mooney 1999). Indeed, in 'urban crisis' accounts, urban informal settlements have been taken as evidence of 'growth out of control' or population explosion, along similar lines to ecologists' concerns about 'overpopulation' (see for example Love and Love 1970; *The Ecologist* 1972; Meadows 1974). However, the close ties between the 'informal sector' – its often small-scale, unregulated activities – and the processes and structures of the larger-scale 'formal sector' have shown that such growth 'was not a dysfunctional urbanization process in which population growth was wildly out of sync with economic growth ... urbanization and economic development were natural bedfellows' (Ward 1999: 66).

Furthermore, despite its persistent identification as a causal factor (e.g. Neuwirth 2005), rural-urban migration has slowed in many areas due to economic downturn and a subsequent reduction in the relative socio-economic advantages of the city, meaning it no longer accounts for the majority of population growth. For example, in Mexico City, by 1999 the population growth rate had levelled out at 1.9 per cent per annum – attributed to continuous recession since 1982 – meaning that migration was no longer a major issue (Connolly 1999). But cities continue to grow, albeit at a slower pace than predicted. The continued expansion of urban populations in the face of stagnant or negative urban economic growth has been described as ‘over-urbanization’ (Davis 2004: 10). Much of today’s urban expansion comes from intra-urban moves or existing population growth, which inevitably includes growth from within urban informal settlements. In fact, it may be that, as Bayat (2004: 90) says, such settlements are ‘the quiet encroachment of the ordinary’, or the ‘small-scale, nonconfrontational infiltration of edge or institial sites’ (Davis 2006: 39), rather than the result of dysfunctional urban processes.

Criticisms of legalist accounts

A structuralist approach suggests that responsibility for addressing issues around informal development, whether relating to poverty, poor housing or dysfunctional urbanisation, lies with the state. But whereas structuralist approaches see the state as the solution, legalist accounts see it as part of the problem. The ‘legalist’ view is more aligned with ‘heroic’ (Roy 2005) or ‘populist’ (García Canclini 2005) interpretations, whereby the state creates the problem of informality through excessive regulation, particularly in relation to the supply of land. Such accounts assume the capacity of the market to resolve housing demand; whereas an excessively bureaucratic state framework may impede this process. The acceptance of non-state, or market-led, interventions is therefore central to this approach, which commends the entrepreneurial spirit of informal settlement dwellers. As with De Soto (2000), this approach sees the formalisation or regularisation of property ownership (through granting of legal titles) as the ‘solution’ to informality. Legalists, then, see informality as a ‘problem’ with a ‘solution’; but a solution in which state intervention should be limited to setting the right conditions for the market to operate (i.e. by

formalising property ownership). This is open to criticism that it absolves the state of its responsibility for housing provision, similar to earlier critiques of self-help (e.g. Ward 1982; Moser and Peake 1987). It can also be criticised for the simplistic assumption that freehold titles will address the complex circumstances of urban informal settlements. Individual freehold titles do not promote socio-spatial integration, and regularisation has had little impact on urban poverty, as '[h]ousing rights cannot be reduced to individual property rights' (Fernandes 2002: 7).

In particular, the legalist view often conflates informality with illegality, implying that informal settlements' dominant feature is the fact that they develop outside existing legal and regulatory frameworks (Imparato and Rusler 2003). In fact, empirical studies have found that within informality there are degrees of illegality, in which property *ownership* (as opposed to just titles) still counts for a lot; and that rather than a unitary conception of property rights, different forms of ownership are treated differently by the law (Fernandes and Varley 1998). Furthermore, illegal forms of urban land and housing production are not restricted to the poor, and informal or *de facto* law governs much practice alongside formal law and institutions, 'hence the proliferation of forms of land and housing production which, while illegal, can enjoy greater social and political legitimacy than the official ones' (Fernandes and Varley 1998: 4). Arguing that *de facto* or perceptual security of tenure is as important as *de jure* or legal tenure, Van Horen (2000: 393) asserts that '[i]nformal settlements work according to logic that is more flexible than the rigid, relatively permanent world of city halls and planning statutes'. Conversely, even settlements which enjoy legal tenure may be lacking in full services and other 'formal' elements, as the research findings show.

However, a legalist perspective which emphasises a technical or bureaucratic understanding of informality seems to be the prevailing official view of urban informal settlements in many countries of the global South. For example, housing policy discourse in South Africa remains dominated by a technocratic elite which focuses on the illegality of informal settlements, serving a delivery-driven political agenda which sidelines social movements and civil society organisations, who are often more attuned to residents' needs

(Huchzermeyer 2004a). Similarly, the authors of a report on expanding housing choices for the low-income sector in Mexico state that '[l]egal status is usually the leading cause of irregular settlements' (Siembieda and Lopez Moreno 1997: 657). While this may be technically correct in that such settlements' irregularity often derives from their illegal land tenure, it shows little reflection on the underlying social, political or economic causes of this situation.

Over-reliance on legal factors, particularly housing standards and regulatory frameworks, may also lead to erroneous theoretical constructions. In particular, the idea of the 'housing gap' which has driven urban policy in many countries of the global South has been criticised as lacking validity, due to its basis in housing standards criteria deriving from the global North, which are at best irrelevant and at worst harmful in this context (Hardoy and Satterthwaite 1989). This relates to the problem of 'ethnocentric' perspectives on urban issues, additional to the consideration that 'planning' theories and structures in the global South may derive from colonial influences (Devas 1993), discussed later in this chapter⁹. Defining the problem in legal terms, it has been estimated that an average of 40 per cent and sometimes up to 70 per cent of the populations of major cities in the global South are living in illegal conditions relating to land tenure, infrastructure requirements and building standards (Durand-Lasserve and Clerc 1996 in Fernandes and Varley 1998: 3). It seems unlikely that the proposed solution of property legalisation will be able to solve the social, political and economic issues underlying this, particularly in the light of existing regularisation programmes' limited success in curtailing further informal settlement.

A critique of the 'formal/informal' dualism

Perhaps, as Roy (2005) has pointed out, the problem with dominant paradigms of informality, which portray either crisis or heroism, is that both tend to view formality as fundamentally separate from informality, implying that formalisation is the 'solution' to informality. According to Roy (2005: 147), the issue lies with the portrayal of informality

⁹ Indeed, despite debate over whether 'postcolonial' concerns can apply in Latin America after 'two centuries of republican rule' (Varley 2008: 2), some vestiges of Spanish administrative influence are still faintly detectable in Mexican municipal bureaucracy.

as a 'state of exception' from the formal order of urbanisation. In fact, Roy (2005: 149) argues that informal urbanisation is made possible by the regulatory form of land in a specific context (for example, in the case of Mexican *ejidos*¹⁰), meaning that 'informality must be understood not as the object of state regulation but rather as produced by the state itself'. As she puts it, 'Informality is the state of exception determined by the sovereign power of the planning apparatus' (Roy 2005: 153). The 'state of exception' is actually an expression of sovereignty, in that only the sovereign can determine what is within it or not. Informality is therefore an example of this, as the state determines what is formal and informal, or legitimate and illegitimate: thus '[s]tate power is reproduced through the capacity to construct and reconstruct categories of legitimacy and illegitimacy' (Roy 2005: 149).

Legalisation of informality, then, is not simply bureaucratic or technical, but political. In other words, the state's imposition of legal and regulatory frameworks creates informality, and its presentation as a 'state of exception' reproduces the binary logic of the formal/informal dualism. Even progressive accounts (such as Brillembourg et al. 2005) which set up divisions between the 'formal' and 'informal' city with the aim of contesting them, are susceptible to this; as Varley (2008: 8) notes, 'despite *a priori* theoretical commitment to dislocating conceptual binaries, discussions of specific aspects of informality continue to shore up dualistic interpretations of the informal versus the formal city'. However, this dualistic view of the city may also contain normative judgements about informality.

Accounts which portray informality as the opposite of formality tend to negate the reciprocal relationship which often exists between 'informal' and 'formal' sectors (Vaious 1997; Cameron and Gibson 2005). In fact, in spatial, economic, political, cultural and social terms, the relationship is often so messy and tangled as to make these two supposed opposites anything but clearly delineated. This observation is not new, as has been shown above; yet it is surprising how many problematic assumptions about informality still endure today, despite years of research and policy. Perhaps, as Burgess (1978: 1105) gloomily

¹⁰ Agricultural land collectively owned under Mexican law. See Chapter Four for more detail.

observed more than 20 years ago, 'urban problems would seem to grow at the same order of magnitude as the literature offered to explain and solve them'. But this does not preclude interrogating the concept of 'informality' for its usefulness and limitations in describing what actually appears to be going on, in the context where it is applied (Gilbert 2004). This is especially relevant if, as some argue, the neoliberal state's acquiescence in informality practices has allowed the re-emergence of informality as a way of life today (AlSayyad and Roy 2004).

Some have argued that generalisation about urban informal settlements is itself risky (Gilbert and Gugler 1992). As alluded to in Chapter One, the problem of terminology lies with the tendency to homogenise cities and places by using a single term for the many diverse forms of low-income housing (e.g. Huchzermeyer 2004b). Definitions of informality are many and varied, but it is necessary to settle on some appropriate terminology to use as a way of understanding the issues at hand (Vaiou 1997). In fact, the problem with generalisation may lie partly in the nature of informality as geographically situated. It has been suggested that different geographies of informality correspond to different geographies of knowledge, meaning urban informality is 'a fluid concept, acquiring shape only in regional locations' (AlSayyad and Roy 2004: 4). The context-specific nature of informality, relating to different land markets and cultural specificities, means that informal processes are quite distinct between global regions (AlSayyad 1993).

However, generalisations often rest on the stereotypical image of the shantytown on the periphery of a megacity, obscuring the complex, multi-faceted nature of informal settlements. As Varley (2008: 6-7) asserts, more often than not, the image of the Rio *favela* is employed as the embodiment of informality, which risks 'a misleading overgeneralisation of the morphology, origins and problems of the informal settlement'. This also relates to conceptualisations of relations between informal settlements and the city, which may be viewed as homogenous (based on the 'formal/informal' dualism) rather than multiple, complex and interconnected.

As suggested in this section's discussion, simplified conceptions of informality continue to pervade much of our thinking and understanding of urban informal settlements today. However, more recent alternative theorisations of urban informality may offer prospects to address this.

2.3 Alternative conceptions of urban informal settlements

This section reviews some alternative conceptions of urban informal settlements which build on and challenge the discourses and assumptions outlined above, and may help to explore the complex and intricate nature of informality. A look at some ideas which emphasise processes of informality, and its dynamic nature – including conceptions of informality as an organising urban logic or as a social process – may address concerns about binary thinking. The idea of 'ordinary cities' is particularly helpful for its critique of certain relevant debates, and other conceptions of the informal as more prosaic or everyday, rather than a state of exception, seem to speak to this.

Processes of informality

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

On the basis that the informal mode of housing production is used not only by the poor but by the middle classes and elite in 'Second and Third World cities', Roy (2005: 149) proposes that 'a complex continuum of legality and illegality' exists. Within this spectrum, informal housing may be lower-income or middle class, but crucially, it embodies different concretisations of legitimacy, meaning that '[t]he divide here is not between formality and informality but rather a differentiation *within* informality' (Roy 2005: 149). Perhaps what is needed, as AlSayyad (2004) suggests, is a shift of analytical framework, to account for new forms of informality engendered by liberalisation and globalisation, whereby individuals belong simultaneously to informal and formal sectors. In fact, AlSayyad reminds us, informality is not new as an analytical concept or urban process: rather, it is formality which could be viewed as the 'new' mode, imposed upon the existing order of things since the foundation of formal markets in the nineteenth century.

Alternatively, Robinson (2002, 2006) has asserted that there is a fundamental flaw in the way that much theory about cities in the global South is formulated, as briefly mentioned in Chapter One. Her premise is that disciplinary categorisation, from within the fields of both urban studies and development studies, fails to account for life within the majority of cities in the world, and in doing so, limits imaginings about what they are and what they could be. Urban studies, with its concepts of 'global' and 'world' cities, has been responsible for the continued understanding of the world through a Western-centric set of concerns, focused primarily on economic systems. Cities which are less powerful in the global economy are condemned to a low position in the hierarchical ranking of cities, or consigned to 'structural irrelevance'. This includes 'a large number of cities around the world which do not register on intellectual maps that chart the rise and fall of global and world cities' (Robinson 2002: 531). Indeed, even the so-called 'megacities' of the global South barely qualify for most discussions of 'world cities' (Gilbert 1998). The discipline most concerned with cities of the global South is development; and this field has been subject to associating whole urban conglomerations with those parts which are lacking services, housing and so on. The development conceptualisation 'broadly understands these places to be lacking in the qualities of city-ness, and ... is concerned to improve capacities of governance, service provision and productivity' (Robinson 2002: 531).

Generalising in this way about cities, whether in terms of high finance or infrastructural inadequacy, obscures other aspects of urban life such as 'dynamic economic activities, popular culture, innovations in urban governance and the creative production of diverse forms of urbanism', which may all be mobilised for improving city life (Robinson 2002: 540). Robinson makes a call for the 'decolonisation' of urban studies, in order to 'produce a cosmopolitan, postcolonial¹¹ urban studies' (Robinson 2002: 533) capable of allowing cities to be 'ordinary'. This would allow the conceptualisation of cities as creative places (Amin and Graham 1997), through capturing more of their diversity and potential, in order to imagine different futures. The idea of 'ordinary cities' understands all cities as 'diverse, creative, modern and distinctive, with the possibility to imagine (within the not inconsiderable constraints of contestations and uneven power relations) their own futures and distinctive forms of city-ness' (Robinson 2002: 546). This view of cities as 'ordinary' arguably contains an implicit critique of 'informality' discourses, based on their formulation of a certain lens through which to see cities of the global South, and association of whole cities with their poorest parts. It also challenges some of the more homogenising accounts of cities and the places within them, suggested by Robinson's (2006) critique of development (see also Escobar 1995). Following this, some authors have suggested that one way of responding to the call for theories that transcend standardised categories is by 'bringing into view and theorising a range of ordinary spaces' in the urban setting (Legg and McFarlane 2008: 7).

One notable attempt to capture some of the complexity of cities in the context of the global South by moving away from standardised categories is the work of Simone (2000, 2001, 2004) on African cities. Simone (2004: 13) has argued that any effort to piece together viable forms of urban life involves a complex interweaving of resources and problems, as

¹¹ Postcolonial studies is concerned with 'temporal comparisons between pre-independence and post-independence conditions' in a given context, usually within the global South (Legg and McFarlane 2008: 7). While some question to what extent postcolonial models apply to Latin America (Varley 2008), others have seen the very idea of Latin America as based on imperial/colonial foundations (Mignolo 2005).

‘a wide range of provisional, highly fluid, yet coordinated and collective actions are ... generated that run parallel to, yet intersect with, a growing proliferation of decentralized local authorities, small-scale enterprises, community associations, and civil society organizations’.

According to Simone, these actions are full of local moral and social economies, but must also interact with a broad range of external processes and actors; and such practices have a major role to play in making African cities work (if on some level they do). Similarly, Robinson (2002: 545) asserts that cities are part of overlapping networks, both within the city and extending far beyond its spatial reach.

The recognition of complexity, and the refusal to submit cities to simplistic categorisations, strikes a chord with efforts to move beyond the formal/informal dualism. In looking at how urban actors assemble and act, Simone recognises that

‘urban collaboration does not simply reflect and institutionalize clearly identifiable social processes and forms. There are gaps and openings, room for negotiation and provocation, and thus collaborations can take many forms’ (Simone 2004: 12).

This work seems to re-introduce a human dimension into the urban panorama of global Southern cities, reasserting the complexity of the city, in contrast to more homogenising accounts. Simone’s methodology of participating and observing in the very societies he writes about, in a variety of roles, reflects his assertion that African (and perhaps all) cities may elude systematic social research, but that engagement is crucial for any attempt at understanding. He argues that it is through the interrogation of everyday practices – however invisible or strange – that urban realities may be understood (Simone 2004).

Everyday informality

The idea of the ‘ordinary’ or ‘everyday’ nature of cities, then, seems to merit further investigation as a potential alternative for understanding urban informal settlements. In the context of urban geography and sociology, it has been argued that the everyday

relationships between people and places, or the 'routine' lives of 'ordinary' people, should be an object of investigation. In particular, De Certeau (1984) has emphasised everyday practices in urban places as an analytical focus for understanding the city. In this view, it has been suggested that 'focusing on the everyday encourages [us] to address the importance of people as more or less autonomous actors who creatively engage with, and shape, their surroundings' (Holloway and Hubbard 2001: 37).

This is perhaps all the more important in places which are commonly categorised as 'disorderly'. Jacobs (1961: 50) has suggested that,

'Under the seeming disorder of the old city, wherever the city is working successfully, is a marvelous order. ... It is a complex order ... composed of movement and change ... an intricate ballet in which the individual dancers and ensembles all have distinctive parts which miraculously reinforce each other and compose an orderly whole'.

The idea here is that within the chaos of the urban landscape, 'order' can be found. This is not to discount the possibility of heterogeneity or diversity, but to recognise that disorder and order are not necessarily mutually exclusive. In the context of urban informal settlements, 'order' may entail dynamic complexity, relating as much to the internal logic of these places as to externally-imposed norms, and requiring a different perspective to the standard categories employed by dominant narratives.

Viewing the city as the site of flows and difference, and seeing 'the constant hum of the everyday and prosaic web of practices that makes the city into such a routinely frenetic place', may open up new possibilities for emancipatory potential through 'numerous forms of ordinary urban sociality' (Amin and Thrift 2004: 232-4). Gilbert's (1994: 90) description of informal settlement consolidation in Latin American cities echoes this, painting a picture of collective efforts to improve individual dwellings which take place in an atmosphere of gaiety, as 'gradually, what began as a sea of shanties becomes a consolidated settlement'. This also resonates with the idea of conviviality as

‘the opposite of industrial productivity ... [rather, it is] autonomous and creative intercourse among persons, and the intercourse of persons with their environment’ (Illich 1980 in Peattie 1998: 247).

In a specific neighbourhood context, these ideas could inform an approach which examines not only the one-off, formal, or exceptional processes that led to its development (such as land acquisition, or eviction), but also the everyday, mundane activities taking place there. It may be through these activities that the neighbourhood meshes with the wider city, in all its complexity and creativity, recalling Bayat’s (2004: 90) description of ‘the quiet encroachment of the ordinary’.

Ordinary urban sociality in the context of the wider city is a theme that occurs in other perspectives which emphasise envisioning city futures. Healey (2002) suggests a different way of understanding urban diversity, through collective imaginings of cities. While the city is not a material subject which can ‘act’ autonomously, its existence and power to act lie in how it is imagined and brought to life, and how these imaginings become mobilised to shape politics, public policy and projects (Healey 2002: 1783). She describes how ‘[i]n many places, old conceptions of the city, congealed into plans and regulatory principles, jostle with and constrain new practices and new images’ (Healey 2002: 1783), imagery which brings to mind the formation of new settlements against the backdrop of the city. She argues that focusing the debate on imagining the city links individual concerns to a wider social world, and enables thinking about the city’s different ‘places’, its multidimensionality, the multiplicity of city-dwellers and their ways of life. The idea of the city becomes ‘a terrain of debate about “our city”, a resource for identity formation and for building a sense of shared context ... an active presence in the life of city-dwellers’ (Healey 2002: 1789).

Such theories, relating to imagining the city, the everyday, and conviviality, have been described as ‘an urbanism of hope, rather than despair’, based on the potential of cities: for diversity, to bring people together, and to provide a platform for social and political engagement (Cochrane 2007: 142-3). The everyday participation of citizens, at the scale and intensity that only cities can provide, harbours the potential for conflict but also

creativity. However, such celebratory accounts of the city have also been criticised for their reluctance to confront structural issues of power and marginalisation – which have material effects on the lives of many urban residents – because of their emphasis on openness and interaction (Cochrane 2007: 144). Healey's account goes some way to addressing this, incorporating a political dimension in her suggestion of a multidimensional concept of the city which reflects and interrelates the diversity and complexity of urban life, to generate a discursive realm for all residents. Ultimately, this discursive terrain should form part of building strategic urban government capacity (Healey 2002).

Indeed, urban government's capacity (or lack of) to deal with urban informal settlements is a pervasive theme in relevant academic debates. Accounts often focus on potential attitudes taken by 'the state' towards marginalised residents (e.g. Hardoy and Satterthwaite 1989; Devas and Rakodi 1993), such as 'repression', 'neglect', and 'support'. More recent scholarship explores the complexity of relations between those who 'see the state' and agents of the state, which may be overlapping categories (Corbridge et al. 2005). In this view, the state is not a single entity, and may lie partly in 'the shadow state' of corrupt brokers and intermediaries, but is also located in a multiplicity of government practices and relationships. Corbridge et al. (2005) see potential for the state to engage with the poor as citizens; unlike Chatterjee (2004), who argues that a dual system of legally-protected citizens and systematically marginalised urban poor is maintained by the state, meaning that equal access to citizenship is a fiction. The class of non-citizens, the majority of city dwellers in many cases, does not enjoy the same legally-constituted rights as citizens, and is disengaged from civil society (Chatterjee 2004). Instead, the relationship between those who govern and the governed depends on the latter's receipt of government benefits, due to their mobilisation as local political groups.

Others have suggested that in the context of struggles over the city and space, the meaning of citizenship has shifted from being a given status (obtained through birthright or naturalisation) to being a performative act (Lepofsky and Fraser 2003: 127-8). The idea of citizenship is therefore indicative of power relations between social actors (Lepofsky and Fraser 2003: 139). Indeed, in the context of South Africa, citizenship has been seen as a

means of subjectivising populations, according to the normative qualities it incorporates (Chipkin 2003; Watson 2003). By capturing individuals into relationships, through (for example) service provision or participation, the state compels those individuals to act in certain ways according to norms of appropriate functional, social or ethical behaviour (Chipkin 2003). In a Latin American setting, Jones (2004: 164) has argued that 'civil citizenship is highly contingent and may even be undermined by a democratisation that threatens the social institutions that previously restrained police and political violence'. In this view, democracy is not necessarily guaranteed by institutions, but may be found in public spaces, which mediate the discourses of groups which occupy them, such as marginalised urban residents.

This section has shown how different aspects of urban informal settlements can be emphasised in an effort to avoid standardised categories and binary thinking. It has been suggested that rather than glorifying or condemning informality, it should be understood as a 'disruptive movement', both disintegrative and reconstructive (García Canclini 2005: 268). In order to move beyond the normative values which so often underlie these discourses, a different way of thinking about informality and formality might be as dynamic, mutually constituting tensions in a particular location or place. This certainly coheres with some recent theories which emphasise urban informality as process, and informal settlements as dynamic, constantly changing places, rather than a collection of static characteristics.

2.4 Conclusion

The aim of this chapter has been to show how the construction of urban informal settlements in discourses, particularly in influential theories, can have marginalising effects. Outlining the key debates on urban informal settlements in the last 50 years, and the interaction between policy and academic discourses in this setting, has shown how this may reinforce problematic assumptions. Conceptions of urban informal settlements often rest on simplistic binaries, particularly the idea that informality and formality are fundamentally

separate. This analytical separation, which continues to dominate debates, means that urban informality is consistently seen as a category outside 'normal' urban considerations. Moreover, this often entails a negative judgement about informality, as the 'disorderly', illegitimate counterpart to the formal city. This may have material effects for urban residents, including reinforcing spatial isolation and discrimination through social marginalisation. However, the possibility of different concepts applicable to urban informality may offer prospects to address this problem, and in this way, to change policy and practice. Different forms of thinking about informality which emphasise dynamic tensions in the debates, and the fluidity of concepts according to different contexts, times, places, discourses and so on, may have potential in this way. This includes seeing urban informality as process, and informal settlements as dynamic, constantly changing places, rather than adhering to static or standardised categorisations.

This is not to argue that informality does not or should not exist as a category. However problematic, it seems lodged in our imaginings of the global South. It could even be described as a 'nondispensable fiction', to borrow Mitchell's (2000 in Robinson 2006: 14) phrase about modernity. However, just as Amin and Thrift (2002) have enjoined us to 'reimagine the urban', it may be that we need to 'reimagine the informal'. While the idea of an 'informal sector' 'subsume[s] the heterogeneity of informal processes to the myth of a well-cohered and coterminous domain of ... activities' (Simone 2000: 1), it may be that informalities connote different forms in different local contexts. Perhaps, as Robinson (2006) asserts, taking a view of cities (and neighbourhoods) as 'ordinary' would allow a more nuanced view of places which simultaneously contain both formal and informal elements, without necessarily privileging or prejudicing either. In this thesis, I argue that a more nuanced way of understanding urban informal settlements is needed, in order to see them as places in their own right, and as part of the cities where they develop. The next chapter explores theories which may offer the potential for this re-imagining of urban informal settlements, based on understandings of 'place'.

CHAPTER 3: URBAN INFORMAL SETTLEMENTS: ORDINARY PLACES?

But to raze it is to send the problem elsewhere or worse: not to consider it.
No, we must dismiss the West and re-learn to read: learn to re-invent the city.

Patrick Chamoiseau *Texaco* (1998: 269)

Introduction

The marginalisation of urban informal settlements, in theoretical, spatial or social terms, is a problem, for residents of these places, and for the city as a whole. Certain influential narratives emphasise squalor and crime as defining characteristics of urban informal settlements; while others, as shown in the previous chapter, counter that they are 'complex and changing social processes that play themselves out in intricate spatial arrangements' (Huchzermeyer 2004b: 47). Although informal settlements are often viewed in isolation, they are definitively part of the city, in a material and functional as well as in an imaginative sense. Their existence is contingent on the city: it provides the reason for their development there, in that particular place. It is also (particularly in Latin America) contingent on the idea of change: the hope of consolidation and incorporation into the wider urban landscape. A more nuanced understanding of how these places are made and become part of the city, in the spirit of seeing them as 'ordinary' rather than exceptional places, holds potential for the re-evaluation and incorporation of the efforts made there into the narrative of the city as a whole.

Chamoiseau's (1998: 269) call to 're-invent the city' in the above quotation refers to this need to see the city differently. This chapter suggests that looking differently at urban informal settlements might contribute to a re-thinking of some of the more static and problematic analytical categories outlined in the previous chapter. Seeing informal settlements primarily as places in their own right and as part of the city means accepting that they are complex and pluralistic places, in which spatial, social, cultural and political (as well economic) activities take place. Building on the idea of informality as dynamic tension or social process, it is suggested that a place-based approach may be best suited to understanding the spatial, social, cultural and political processes that construct urban

informal settlements. 'Place' provides a focus for understanding urban informal settlements differently: focusing on neighbourhoods rather than housing alone; as part of the city, rather than decontextualised places; and constituted by social processes, as well as more static or fixed attributes.

The second half of the theoretical framework for my research, outlined in this chapter, is based on explorations of 'place' from human geography. A brief summary of some of the main understandings of the concept of 'place' in this context is given in the first section, guided by Cresswell's (2004) work as a useful starting point. Two highly influential approaches to understanding place – phenomenological, and 'social constructionist' – provide the most constructive analytical prospects, and these are explored in the next two sections respectively. Finally, the idea of place-making is proposed (in the fourth section) as an alternative analytical lens which synthesises the advantages of these approaches, and seems to offer a means of seeing urban informal settlements differently. The chapter concludes with a reflection on implications of this for theories of informality.

3.1 'Place' in geographic enquiry

This short introductory section outlines how place has come to be seen in human geography (under which broad disciplinary heading other strands such as 'critical social geography' are included), the field most concerned with notions of space and place. It explores why 'place' is so central to geographic enquiry, based on its conceptualisation as a socio-spatial construct.

The importance of place

Seeing the world in terms of places means seeing its richness and complexity, as '[t]o think of an area of the world as a rich and complicated interplay of people and the environment – as a place – is to free us from thinking of it as facts and figures' (Cresswell 2004: 11). Places are 'the stuff of stories, *part of the little histories of the world*' (Friedmann 2007: 260, original emphasis). They imbue our life with meaning, and may even be inherent to our identity. Some have gone so far as to assert that place is constitutive of our selves as

human beings; and that a deep relationship with places is as necessary as close relationships with people (Relph 1976: 43). It is suggested that the importance of 'place' derives from its social content. Place is seen as a socio-spatial construct, understood broadly as spaces that people are attached to, or 'meaningful location' (Cresswell 2004: 7). Geography's focus on the role of space and place in a human-centred way has developed over the last two decades, as human geography has moved away from the description of regions towards 'the analysis of the role of geographic forces in the explanation of other things' (Cresswell 1996: 12).

Initial positivistic approaches to place within the discipline took a functional and even geometric perspective. Early regional geography had a prevailing descriptive character, seeking to understand or define the uniqueness of a particular region, consisting of natural as well as human elements. The 'spatial science' approach to geography of the 1950s and 1960s reduced human beings to abstract points on a surface, whose behaviour could be mapped, modelled and predicted (Holloway and Hubbard 2001). In reaction to this, later human geography sought to develop different ways of thinking about people and places, to create 'human-centred' geographies (Holloway and Hubbard 2001: 14). However, initially positivism prevailed: for example, 'environmental image research' in the 1960s and 1970s investigated people's responses to their environment, based on their interaction with representations (in terms of mental images of individuals) of that environment (Shields 1991). In the 1970s, geography defined places as containers for culture, with an increasing emphasis on social processes in place; although at first, this was limited by totalising definitions of culture as 'a total way of life held in common by a group of people' (Jordan and Rowntree 1982 in Shurmer-Smith 2002: 2), with a corresponding view of place as static and bounded.

More recently, in human geography, 'it has become axiomatic ... that as people construct places, places construct people (inferring a reciprocity between people and place)' (Holloway and Hubbard 2001: 7). The idea of 'place' provides focus for the supposition that 'social' and 'spatial' concerns are analytically inseparable. 'Place' as a socio-spatial construct refers simultaneously to geographical location and social status, while also

implying a relationship with 'appropriate'/'inappropriate' behaviours (Holloway and Hubbard 2001: 87; see also Sibley 1995; Cresswell 1996), explored in more depth below. More specifically, the three fundamental aspects of place can be identified as location, locale, and sense of place (Agnew 2005: 89).

Location relates to the 'where' of a place, often referred to in the everyday use of the word; although this is not necessarily static, as places may be mobile (for example modes of transport) or transient (such as markets) (Jirón 2008). Locale refers to the material setting for social relations, 'where everyday-life activities take place ... no mere address but the where of social life and environmental transformation' (Agnew 2005: 89). In other words, it is the shape of the place where people conduct their lives, or its material form, whether constituted by roads and buildings, walls and doors, or plants and rocks. The third element, sense of place, perhaps the most difficult to capture, is described as 'identification with a place as a unique community, landscape and moral order' (Agnew 2005: 89). Also known as 'place meaning', it relates to 'the subjective and emotional attachment people have to place' (Cresswell 2004: 7), underpinning the social element of place which has preoccupied human geography for the last few decades.

A basic dualism of space and place runs through much of geographic thought, in which place is seen as both distinct from and part of space. Space is general, as opposed to the particularity of place (Tuan 1977). Place is often conceptualised as happening in space, whereas space is seen as undifferentiated or a 'fact of life' without meaning, like time (Cresswell 2004: 10). Space therefore becomes place when humans attach meaning to it. Cresswell (2004: 11) highlights the epistemological, as well as the ontological dimension of place, asserting that 'place is not just a thing in the world but a way of understanding the world', meaning that it relates to what we decide to emphasise and what we decide is unimportant. This emphasis implies a relation with power, as it opens the possibility for contestation and conflict among different understandings and experiences of places, as well as about the idea of 'place' itself.

Indeed, in more explicit terms, Cresswell (2004: 12) specifies that '[p]lace is about how we make the world meaningful and the way we experience the world. Place, at a basic level, is space invested with meaning in the context of power'. Different groups imbue space and place with different meanings, uses and values (Holloway and Hubbard 2001). As Massey (1991) has pointed out, there is never one single sense of place which everyone shares, even within the same neighbourhood. Places do not have single, essential identities; rather, there are multiple identities for any given place, which may be a source of richness but also conflict (Massey 1991).

Different approaches to place

Cresswell (2004: 51) has identified three different approaches to place: descriptive, social constructionist, and phenomenological. Descriptive or ideographic approaches to place are concerned with the distinctiveness and particularity of individual places. This is exemplified by the regional geographic approaches mentioned above, which include the work of geographers such as De la Blache and Sauer. These somewhat descriptive approaches are of less interest here, given the research aim of using 'place' as a way of understanding social processes. More useful may be what Cresswell calls 'social constructionist' approaches, which are perhaps better denominated as 'critical social geographic' theories of place. Cresswell's grouping of a number of different approaches under this heading is based on their view of places as instances of underlying social processes, such as capitalism, patriarchy and heterosexism. Broadly speaking, these approaches have a critical understanding of places as social constructs within unequal power relations of domination and exploitation, founded on acts of exclusion. In more detail, Agnew (2005: 90-1) has identified different strands of thought on place, including a neo-Marxist perspective, represented by Lefebvre's work on the social production of space, and the work of Harvey; a post-modern feminist perspective, best seen in Massey's writing (which could also be viewed as post-structuralist); and a contextualist-performative perspective, which includes Thrift's work. Finally, the phenomenological approach, which seeks to define human existence 'in place', may also be helpful here. This approach takes a humanistic approach to place (rather than places) as a central meaningful component in human life, 'a centre of meaning and field of care that form[s] the basis for human

interaction' (Cresswell 2004: 49). This includes humanistic geographers such as Relph and Tuan, as well as philosophers such as Casey.

Here, Cresswell's (2004) use of the terms 'phenomenological' and 'social constructionist' are based on his interpretation of a long tradition of social philosophy, which he has adapted, introducing 'space' into sociological ideas. In fact, social theory is, by its nature, always situated, and there is no such thing as objectivity or freedom from context; paying attention to spatial concerns, which are often ignored in social theory, may provide an alternative base from which to criticise current arrangements and imagine others (Shields 1991). 'Social constructionism' in its sociological sense usually relates to theories emphasising 'the socially created nature of social life' (Marshall 1998: 609). It is associated with approaches that emphasise the active, creative production of society by human beings, in which the world is made, rather than taken for granted; the best known of these is probably Berger and Luckmann's 'The Social Construction of Reality'. Social constructionism is often contrasted with essentialism, in that it moves away from the idea of the taken-for-granted, and questions the social roots of phenomena (Marshall 1998: 609). In this sense, its roots lie with phenomenology, which as a philosophical method of inquiry involves the systematic investigation of consciousness, as the only phenomenon of which we can be sure. Phenomenology's endeavour is to seek the essential structure of human experience, asking 'if from the variety of ways which men and women behave in and experience their everyday world there are particular patterns which transcend specific empirical contexts and point to the essential human condition' (Seamon 1980: 149).

Cresswell's (2004) distinction between these two different approaches to place – phenomenological and social constructionist (or critical social) – is retained in the next two sections' discussion of these approaches. The fundamental tenet that they share is the importance of the social dimension of place outlined in this section: for this reason, they seem to offer particular potential for seeing urban informal settlements as social places.

3.2 Phenomenological approaches to place

The best-known works to take a phenomenological approach to place are those of Tuan and Relph, who were both influenced by the ideas of the philosopher Heidegger. These theorists examined lived-world experiences of place, and were among the first to '[bring] the issue of place to the attention of geographers in a sustained way' (Cresswell 2004: 42). Some of the key ideas informing these writings are outlined below, followed by a brief critique regarding their potential application to urban informal settlements.

Place, lived experience and dwelling

One of the most often-cited works taking a phenomenological approach to 'place' is Relph's (1976) *Place and Placelessness*. Relph sought to move beyond simplistic ideas of place as location, and to respond to the abstract discussions of environmental issues that formed the basis of decision-making at that time. As he put it,

'distinctive and diverse places are manifestations of a deeply felt involvement for those places by the people who live in them, and ... for many such a profound attachment to place is as necessary and significant as a close relationship with other people. It is therefore disturbing that so much of planning and remaking of landscapes proceeds apparently in ignorance of the importance of place, even though the protests of the expropriated and uprooted demonstrate this very importance' (Relph 1976: i).

Relph was especially concerned with the modern condition of 'placelessness', 'a weakening of the identity of places to the point where they not only look alike, but feel alike and offer the same bland possibilities for experience' (Relph 1976: 90). Relph saw placelessness as ultimately leading to the inability to form authentic relationships with places.

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

which a state of 'existential insidership' is achieved. Relph saw the essence of place as lying in 'the largely unselfconscious intentionality that defines places as profound centres of human existence' (Relph 1976: 43). In other words, one is truly 'in place' when one belongs to a place and feels deep and complete identity with it (Relph 1976: 55). Places occur at all scales, or levels of identity as Relph put it, including home, street, community, town, country, region and continent: moreover, they are overlapping and interpenetrate one another (Relph 1976: 29).

The human responses that make up practical knowledge of places – knowing where to enact our lives, but also protecting our places against those who do not belong, and feeling nostalgic for lost places – reveal the deeper significance of place to human existence (Cresswell 2004: 21). In fact, place is so central to our existence that it underlies our whole being: '[a]n individual is not distinct from his place; he [sic] is that place' (Marcel 1966 in Relph 1976: 43). This approach has been criticised for its somewhat essentialist take on place, which seems at odds with today's mobile society: for example, it appears to discount the possibility of 'belonging' to more than one place. A more in-depth critique is elaborated below, following a brief review of other spatial phenomenologists.

Relph was heavily influenced by the work of Tuan, who also wrote about place from a phenomenological perspective, drawing on an extremely broad range of sources and disciplines to recreate a sense of the breadth and depth of human experience of place in his texts (such as *Space and Place* (1977), one of his later and arguably more influential works). Tuan saw place as the product of and inextricably linked to experience, a factor which he argued was often missing in geographic or 'scientific' accounts of place (Tuan 1977: 201). According to Tuan (1977: 18), experience of a place is through 'all the senses as well as with the active and reflective mind'. Undifferentiated space becomes place when it is thoroughly familiar to us, through kinaesthetic and perceptual experience, as much as formal learning (Tuan 1977: 72-3). For example, in experiments where blindfolded subjects had to find their way through a maze using touch and peripheral vision, they were able to 'learn' a route over the course of repeated attempts, but had difficulty reproducing it by walking the same pattern on the open floor.

So abstract space becomes place when it is filled with meaning; but this process may not be the result of conscious reflection or learning. The almost unconscious, repeated, routine activities that we carry out in our everyday lives contribute to a sense of place and ultimately the intimacy of place attachment, although '[a]t the time we are not aware of any drama; we do not know that the seeds of lasting sentiment are being planted' (Tuan 1977: 143). In fact, it is people's everyday, incremental investment in a place that characterises it. In particular, Tuan (1977: 182) saw place as characterised by 'a density of meaning and stability', stating that '[i]f time is conceived as flow or movement then place is pause' (Tuan 1977: 198).

'Home' plays an important role in the construction of place, according to phenomenological approaches. Tuan (1977: 144) saw home as an intimate place, while Relph identified home as the most complete expression of place, incorporating all other aspects as significant and inseparable, including location, appearance, time, people and place attachment, often manifested through a sense of care and concern for 'here' (Relph 1976: 29-43). In this view, home places are profound centres of human existence, as the foundation of our identity as individuals and groups: '[h]ome in its most profound form is an attachment to a particular setting, a particular environment, in comparison with which all other associations with places have only limited significance' (Relph 1976: 40).

Both theorists were influenced by Heidegger's philosophical inquiry into the nature of place through building and dwelling. Heidegger (1971: 154) asserted that 'spaces receive their being from locations and not from "space"'. Mathematical or geometric 'space' contains no spaces and no places, and the relation between space and location lies in the nature of things *qua* locations, as does the relation of location to 'man' [sic] who lives at that location (Heidegger 1971: 154-5). In other words, space is constituted by things and being. The spaces in which we conduct our lives are provided by locations, and their nature is grounded in buildings, which are the site expression of dwelling; so '[t]he relation between man and space is none other than dwelling, strictly thought and spoken'

(Heidegger 1971: 157). To build, in order to dwell, is the fullest expression of being in the world.

In this view, the meaning of space derives from its relationship with place as existential and perpetual, as 'Man's [sic] essential relationship to places, and through them to space, consists in dwelling ... the essential property of human existence' (Norburg-Schulz 1971 in Relph 1976: 28). The idea of 'being' as intimately linked to 'building' and 'dwelling' seems to strike a chord in the context of urban informal settlements, where high levels of involvement by people in their immediate living environment exist. However, this approach is open to criticisms on a similar basis to Relph's (and Tuan's) essentialist view of 'place'. Heidegger, in particular, seems to offer a justification for nationalist interpretations of 'place' and 'belonging'. These and other concerns are discussed below, in a brief evaluation of the approach's applicability to urban informal settlements.

A phenomenological approach to informality?

At first sight, phenomenological approaches to place seem to offer a fruitful basis from which to explore urban informal settlements. Their emphasis on place as the centre of meaning and indeed, of human existence, was very influential in its time. They offer a human-centred focus that is certainly attractive in the context of urban informal settlements, which may be dehumanised through their reduction to urban poverty statistics, as discussed in the previous chapter. A phenomenological methodology may then provide a way of seeing urban informal settlements as places, in terms of a 'rich and complicated interplay of people and the environment' rather than facts and figures (Cresswell 2004: 11). It could be argued that this perspective is overlooked by theories of informality that focus on structural causes. The focus on everyday, lived experience also provides a means of emphasising the often-neglected residents' view, the 'other history' of cities of the global South, and of reincorporating this into more complex understandings of the city.

Invoking 'the protests of the expropriated and uprooted' (Relph 1976: i) seems particularly relevant in the context of urban informal settlements, where eviction and displacement are

possibilities, real or perceived, for many residents. Relph's concern with creeping placelessness, as (in his view) places are planned out of existence and place attachment decreases, also seems relevant. Certainly, this seems to concur with criticisms of state-built housing in Mexico – the formal solution to housing need there – on the basis of their lack of identity (Varley 2007), which could be seen as 'placelessness'. Conversely, Heidegger's suggestion that dwelling is the making of place through the occupation of space seems to imply in this context that the resident involvement which characterises informal settlements is the most meaningful way of relating to place. This conception of dwelling and building resonates with ideas from the self-help movement, discussed in the previous chapter. In particular, seeing 'housing as a verb' (Turner 1972), the natural unfettered expression of people's need for shelter, seems to relate to the idea of building and dwelling as the highest expression of being in the world.

However, the phenomenological approach has been criticised for its attempt to reduce place to a particular essence, as suggested above. In particular, the claim that place is universally experienced by everyone in the same way fails to account for diversity and difference (Cresswell 2004: 25). This is particularly pertinent with regard to marginalised places such as urban informal settlements, whose residents may have quite a different experience of the city they live in compared to other residents. This exposes phenomenological approaches' lack of an account of power, or the politics of place. A universal starting point seems to be assumed, in which everybody has equal claims to place. This somewhat simplistic world view fails to account for the messy, complex reality in which struggles over place occur. It also seems to discount the possibility of movement or migration, so pertinent in the context of globalisation, which has the potential to foster multiple cross-national or global identifications with place.

This relates to the somewhat problematic idea of place as 'essentially a static concept' (Tuan 1977: 179). The conception of place as static is also implied in Relph's (1976: 90) identification of increased transport as one of the factors in the destruction of place. In fact Relph asserts that the most desirable condition of place experience is 'authentic insidership', which seems to imply that a sense of belonging can only truly derive from

one's place of origin, entailing an idea of place which is regressive and nostalgic. Furthermore, such a view of 'belonging' as contingent on birthplace is open to politicisation (Agnew 2005), and risks playing into the hands of nationalist ideologues. Elsewhere, it has been suggested that the idea of place as 'society anchored since time immemorial in the permanence of an intact soil' is a fantasy (Augé [1992] 1995: 44), a suggestion which presents an implicit critique of phenomenology's static conception of place.

This is also implied in explorations of mobile place and place-making (see for example Urry 2007; Jirón 2008). Places may be commended for their permanence, but they can also be 'as transient as a fairground and as insubstantial as a picnic' (Chaplin 2007: 104). In the context of urban informal settlements, place is often anything but static: it is constantly changing, as people move around, and make and re-make 'place' in different locations and settings. Indeed, these places are often conceptualised in the Latin American urban context as places in progress, suggested by the term 'consolidation' (*consolidación*), frequently used to describe the processes of development which they undergo (e.g. Aguilar 1988; AlSayyad 1993; Gough and Kellett 2001). The fact that these neighbourhoods are often premised on the idea of change and improvement is captured by the term 'slums of hope' (Lloyd 1979), as highlighted by others (e.g. Ward 1999; Varley 2007).

To reconcile some of these issues requires a reconsideration of 'place'. The phenomenological approach outlined in this section, which focuses on lived experience, is useful with regard to its methodological stance. This allows emphasis on the creative elements of human action, and interaction, which are fundamental to constructing these places, as locations but also as sites of meaning. However, a more critical approach to the constraints of place, as well as its opportunities, is needed alongside a means of capturing its fluid nature. The next section reviews some 'social constructionist' or critical social geographic approaches to place, which may be more analytically appropriate in this context.

3.3 Critical social geographic approaches to place

According to Cresswell (2004), while phenomenological approaches seek a deeper, primal sense of place, and descriptive approaches view 'place' as a series of individual places, social constructionist (or critical social) approaches incorporate a synthesis of both. Critical social geographers look at the way place works in a world of social hierarchies: not simply as an outcome of social process, but also as a tool in the creation, maintenance and transformation of relations of domination, oppression and exploitation (Cresswell 2004: 29). This section discusses some of these theories, beginning by focusing on the relation of power to place, and the relevance this has for urban informal settlements. This is followed by an examination of approaches which emphasise place as process, particularly important in the light of the considerations about this setting outlined above.

Place and power

One of the key reasons for using the concept of place to explore urban informal settlements is to shed light on elements that are often obscured in debates on informality, particularly relating to power, and the politics of place. In general, the analyses of informality outlined in the previous chapter, particularly from a structuralist perspective, refer implicitly to issues of power through their focus on marginalisation. However, these accounts often focus on particular forms of power relations, especially between 'the state' and 'the community'. Even where a more nuanced view is taken (e.g. Chipkin 2003; Chatterjee 2004), there is a tendency to conceptualise power as zero sum, in a binary view that tends to see residents of these places as the 'losers' in power relations.

Informal settlements are therefore seen as sites of wholly negative power relations, in which residents are uniformly oppressed by external forces (e.g. Davis 2006), meaning other, more complex power relations and practices may be overlooked. 'Social constructionist' approaches to place offer a response to this: by focusing on the complexities of power in place, it may be possible to better understand the intricate, entangled processes relating to power that occur in urban informal settlements. As

discussed in earlier chapters, these settlements and their residents *are* often subject to domination through manipulation, harassment and prejudice, and the aim is not to underplay this. But it is suggested that by exploring the ‘entanglements of power’ (Sharp et al. 2000) which may occur in these places, a more nuanced understanding of the complexities of resistance and domination that occur in them may be attained.

According to Foucault ([1982] 2002: 340-1), power is ‘a way of acting upon one or more acting subjects by virtue of their acting or being capable of action’; in other words ‘[a] set of actions upon other actions’, which exists only in a relational sense, as exercised by some on others. Power always includes freedom, as it can only be exercised over free subjects, insofar as they are ‘free’: thus power is not an essential phenomenon, but is always part of a reciprocal relation (Rabinow 1984: 247). Others have interpreted this to mean that power is relational, in terms of domination in opposition to resistance (Sharp et al. 2000). Relating to place and in particular the city, power is often framed within the context of ‘the struggle to define what cities mean and subsequently whom cities are for’ (Lepofsky and Fraser 2003: 129). In other words, it is seen as the power to define place meaning.

In an earlier work, Cresswell (1996) explored how place meanings are not natural and obvious, but created by those in power who determine what is and is not appropriate, for example in terms of behaviour in place (see also Holloway and Hubbard 2001: 87). Value and meaning are therefore not inherent in space or place, but must be created, reproduced and defended. Cresswell (1996: 9) explores the idea of normative geographies, which occur when ‘[t]he geographical setting of actions plays a central role in defining our judgement of whether actions are good or bad’. Often, ideas about place reflect a sense of the proper, or expectations about behaviour which combine social with spatial concerns. These expectations are described as ideological in that they serve the interests of those at the top of social hierarchies: it is argued that ‘expectations about behaviour in place are important components in the construction, maintenance, and evolution of ideological values’ (Cresswell 1996: 4). Thus place is not simply a geographical matter, as it intersects with socio-cultural expectations, whereby an authority ‘connects a particular place with a particular meaning to strengthen an ideological position’ (Cresswell 1996: 8).

Power, then, shapes relationships between people and place, not only through the ability of the state to control how people act in certain places, but also through self-management and regulation, based on ideas about what is desirable and culturally valuable (Holloway and Hubbard 2001: 178-207). Here, the idea of place as a means of transmitting ideology seems to resonate with Perlman's (1976) theory of the 'myth of marginality' relating to urban informal settlements, discussed in the previous chapter. Similarly, Shields (1991) suggests viewing marginal places as the result of social spatialisation. Marginal places 'are not necessarily on geographical peripheries but, first and foremost, they have been placed on the periphery of cultural systems of space in which places are ranked relative to each other' (Shields 1991: 3). This theory of social spatialisation refers to the 'social construction of the spatial which is a formation of both discursive and non-discursive elements, practices, and processes' (Shields 1991: 7).

The idea of resistance in response to domination in place often underlies critical approaches. Power is established in place through arbitrary laws, norms and expectations which need constant maintenance by dominant groups; but '[p]ower is not unidirectional, with all people having the potential to resist dominant ideas of what is good and right' (Holloway and Hubbard 2001: 207). It may be that 'people are able to resist the construction of expectations about practice through place by using places and their established meanings in subversive ways' (Cresswell 2004: 27). This aspect of power relations has been addressed, among others, by Pile (1997), who has seen resistance as situated, to be understood where it takes place, rather than through abstract theories that define it with reference to domination. Resistance may occur not only in relation to authority, 'but also through experiences which are not so quickly labelled "power", such as desire and anger, capacity and ability, happiness and fear, dreaming and forgetting' (Pile 1997: 3). This description calls to mind the idea of 'conviviality' (Peattie 1998) and its relation to resistance, linked to residents' everyday activities in urban informal settlements in the previous chapter. Spaces of resistance may be partially connected to, but also partially dislocated from, spaces of domination, as 'power relations are incomplete, fluid, liable to rupture, inconsistent, awkward and ambiguous' (Pile 1997: 14).

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

The stress on entanglements does not ignore the obvious differences between domination and resistance, and the existence of oppression. However, the 'simple purity' of a binary conceptualisation of domination and resistance is replaced by a continuum between two idealised poles: resistance in domination, and domination in resistance (Sharp et al. 2000: 21). Thus each pole contains elements of its opposite, and neither is autonomous, as one always engenders the other. This interpretation acknowledges a debt to Foucault, following his understanding of power as 'having both positive and negative dimensions, operating in ways which can be repressive and progressive, constraining and facilitative, to be condemned and to be celebrated' (Sharp et al. 2000: 2). Thus there is no domination without resistance, but far from closing down potential for resistance, this actually opens it up (Sharp et al. 2000: 2).

Resistance in domination may be through hidden or subtle resistance to regimes of domination or ideological manipulation. It may also be through the 'fragmented state', or its 'sprawling politico-legal-administrative machineries' (Paddison 1983 in Sharp et al.

2000: 22), where '[j]urisdictional wrangling, parochial jealousy and downright incompetence all contribute a variety of "soft subversion" to the state's domination power' (Sharp et al. 2000: 23). Conversely, domination in resistance occurs when lines of power within resistance movements reinforce rather than dismantle forms of domination. The 'domination/resistance' paradigm provides a useful way to conceptualise power relations within *colonias populares* in Mexico, which are inextricably entangled in extremely complex political and social networks.

Place, power and informal settlements

In the context of informal settlements, 'power' may mean, in particular, the power to determine place meaning, expectations of what places are for, and what is appropriate behaviour in place. In this sense, it relates to the consolidation of social structures and hierarchies in spatial terms, which may reflect and reproduce processes of marginalisation in support of existing power structures. For example, the 'irregular' nature of many *colonias* in Mexico derives from the sale of *ejidal* land, in the context of an unregulated, private land market sanctioned by the state. This means that residents are dependent on the authorities' decision to legalise their tenure, and thereby regularise their status, affecting which services they can request.

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

The domination/resistance dyad therefore seems more suited to explaining the complex, messy social realities that exist in these places, which entail not just domination, or resistance, but both. However, Barnett (2002) has criticised Sharp et al. (2000) for not going beyond the limiting conception of a single axis of power relations (domination and resistance), meaning different modes of power are not acknowledged, and strategic or normative political prescriptions are not forthcoming. This criticism notwithstanding, 'entanglements of power' offers a useful analytical lens for understanding urban informal settlements as places. Seeing place as indicative of power relations does not necessarily entail a view of places as oppressive, or as controlled by 'the state'. Instead, seeing urban informal settlements as places, and simultaneously as sites for the exercise of power, opens up a spectrum of experiences which could be labelled as domination/resistance. Rather than being conceived as exclusively one-way and oppressive, or as domination, power is what makes resistance possible, and in this sense can be seen as productive. The idea of 'contradictory consciousness', in which individuals and groups support some aspects of the social order while opposing others (Sharp et al. 2000: 24), seems to offer a pragmatic way to view the materialities of power relations in these places. The critical social geographic view of place suggests an emphasis on the complex power relations which contextualise marginalised neighbourhoods within the city, both internal to the neighbourhood and in connection with other areas and actors.

Place as process

Another strand of social constructionist or critical social approaches conceives of place as process. Influenced by structuration theory (particularly that of sociologist Giddens), theorists such as Bourdieu (2002) have addressed 'the fine balancing of constraint and freedom' (Cresswell 2004: 34) which forms the core of debates about structure and agency briefly outlined in the previous chapter. In the theory of structuration, "'structure" is conceptualised as generative rules and resources drawn upon by actors in the production and reproduction of systems of interaction' (Giddens 1997: 14); production and reproduction are linked by duality of structure, as the structure is both the medium of generating action and the reproduced outcome of it. In other words, structuration

emphasises the reproductive processes by which structurally staged actions re-form social structures (Forester 1998: xiii). It thus provides a resolution to the conflict between views which assign primacy to either structure or agency, as it allows for interaction between both, seeing structures (for example, the rules of a particular language) as fundamental to enabling the actions of agents, but equally, highlighting the role of agents in changing these structures through their own actions (for example, the gradual evolution of the language). This emphasis on both structure *and* agency as dynamic and interacting processes in a geographic sense calls into question views of place as static.

Instead, it is suggested that place could be seen as process. This opens up the possibility that the materialities (or structures) of places influence what people do in them; but these places are in turn influenced by people's activities and agency. Cresswell (2004: 36) uses the example of a square park with bisecting pathways which people bypass in preference of taking a short cut, walking diagonally across the grass, and eventually creating a mud path. Here, Updike's (1961 in Tuan 1977: 142) description of '[t]he modest work of human erosion' is called to mind. Informed by the structuration approach, Pred (1984), in particular, has argued for a disruption of conceptions of place as static, having fixed and measurable attributes. Instead, Pred emphasises the elements of change and process within place, and sees places as always 'becoming', never 'finished'. Place is 'what takes place ceaselessly, what contributes to history in a specific context through the creation and utilization of a physical setting' (Pred 1984: 279). In this view, '[p]laces are never finished but always the result of processes and practices' (Cresswell 2004: 37). Seeing place as a never-ending convergence of processes offers a response to the previous chapter's critique of structuralist conceptions of informality, which underplay the agency of informal settlement residents. Place as process provides a way of reframing informal settlement dwellers as agents, acting within the constraints of existing structures; but also embodying the possibility of resistance to and even disruption of these structures.

Pred's work has been followed by other urban theorists' constructions of place as social process. Massey (1991) has argued that the city is a confluence of flows and difference. Lippard's (1997 in Cresswell 2004: 49) summation of place as 'existing hybridity' captures

the dimensions of place as both static and mobility. Lippard refers to how, in the age of hyper-mobility, every local place is the product of the experiences of those who live there, including old-timers, newcomers, and those who are just passing through. Similarly, place may be seen as performed. As Cresswell (2004: 39) puts it, place is the

‘unstable stage for performance ... constantly struggled over and reimagined in practical ways. Place is the raw material for the creative production of identity rather than an *a priori* label of identity. Place provides the conditions of possibility for creative social practice’.

What all of these approaches emphasising fluidity and process seem to have in common is their openness to notions of change in place; moreover, they suggest creative disruption entailed in the ongoing making of place. This highlights their contrasting stance to phenomenological analyses of place as static and essential.

Place, process and urban informal settlements

The idea of place as process, whereby the material setting of place is a product of the activities of its users, is extremely pertinent in the context of the global South, where (as mentioned above) estimates have put the percentage of new urban housing constructed by the residents themselves as high as 90 per cent (Hardoy and Satterthwaite 1989: 12)¹². In fact, seeing place as process may facilitate increased recognition of the effort which goes into the construction of these places, which is often unrecognised or devalued. Place as process implies a focus on practice and place as it is performed by the people who use it. It allows a view of urban informal settlements as creative places, the result of social practices. Furthermore, the idea of place as made up of many processes, or as a work in progress, seems to accord with residents’ own hopes that the neighbourhood will eventually enjoy formal services, proper recognition and full status within the city through ‘consolidation’. This does not necessarily imply an end goal of static place – home as place may mean something continually improving, with the ongoing possibility of change in this context.

¹² Cresswell’s assertion that ‘[w]e ... inhabit material landscapes that (excepting rare instances) we had little say in constructing’ (Cresswell 2004: 35) does not hold here, and exposes a contextual bias in terms of his global Northern perspective. However, the high levels of resident involvement in place-making in the global South reinforce, rather than undermine, his point that place is unstable and subject to constant remaking.

Thus far, this chapter has reviewed phenomenological approaches to place, and ‘social constructionist’ (or critical social geographic) approaches. Taken separately, each approach has some drawbacks relating to its suitability for analysing urban informal settlements; but an analytical lens can be synthesised by drawing on the most relevant elements of each. Spatial phenomenology offers a methodological perspective that emphasises the human dimension of place, thus providing a useful analytical focus on lived experience, which in the context of urban informal settlements can be used to highlight the perspectives and activities of marginalised residents. The ‘social constructionist’ approaches reviewed here offer a more critical account of power and place, in terms of situating places within complex networks of power relations characterised by domination/resistance, rather than taking a zero sum view of power. While this may relate to how the wider city and ‘the state’ conceptualise and relate to urban informal settlements, it also opens the way for a view of everyday resistance, through contesting and conflicting interpretations of place meaning. Finally, approaches which see places as fluid and in process refute the static, essentialist conceptions that spatial phenomenology suggests, and seem to undermine binary conceptions of urban areas as either ‘formal’ or ‘informal’. This understanding of place as dynamic also emphasises the element of continuous creation in urban informal settlements.

These three strands of geographic thought, outlined in this section and the previous one, can be brought together in ‘place-making’, an analytical perspective which sees urban informal settlements as places, relating to the ongoing creation of place meaning through human action and interaction in the context of power. The next section explores the analytical capacity of ‘place-making’ in more detail.

3.4 The importance of place-making

This section considers how to ‘operationalise’ the conception of place-making, as an analytical tool for understanding how urban informal settlements are spatially and socially

constructed. To this end, it begins with a brief definitional discussion, followed by a review of the importance of place meaning, and how this relates to urban informal settlements.

Conceptualising place-making

The idea of 'place-making' has its origins in urban design (see for example Alexander et al. 1977). More recently, it has been used to emphasise the socio-spatial processes which construct place, and in particular to emphasise the social and physical construction of places by people. It has been defined by Schneekloth and Shibley (1995: 1) as 'the way in which all of us as human beings transform the places in which we find ourselves into places in which we live'. In fact, place-making may be carried out at different scales and by different agents:

'All over the world people are engaged in place-making activities. Homeowners redecorate, build additions, manicure the lawn. Neighbourhood organizations put pressure on people to tidy their yards; city governments legislate for new public buildings to express the spirit of particular places. Nations project themselves to the rest of the world through postage stamps, money, parliament buildings, national stadia, tourist brochures, etc' (Cresswell 2004: 5).

This definition considers making places to be a universal human activity. In this way, it emphasises the perceptual dimension of place stressed by phenomenological approaches' humanistic stance. Its universal nature facilitates a perspective on the lived experience of place as something fundamental to human experience, although not necessarily experienced in the same way universally.

Elsewhere, place-making has been defined as 'part of an everyday social process of constructing and reconstructing space', both a communicative process and an individual mental one (Burkner 2006: 2), highlighting its individual and collective dimensions. As an active verb, 'place-making' stresses the agency of the subject, and in particular the idea of place as process. Place-making, then, permits a wide view of the influences and processes brought to bear on a place, and its construction in a physical but also social sense, by

emphasising that places result ‘from the aggregate of many decisions over time’ (Goodman 1972: 242). As Chaplin (2007: 109) points out, ‘The process of place-making does not begin with its inhabitation ... but with the first move towards its constitution, which might involve a petition, a compulsory purchase order, or a food fair’. Place-making captures the incremental nature of place, in that it includes the activities of the many ordinary citizens who pass through, live in, use, build, visit or avoid a place, and are thus involved, directly or indirectly, in its physical and social construction. The analytical use of place-making here aims to uncover the everyday activities which construct place, as well as more strategic, one-off events, in the context of exploring the complexity of urban informal settlements.

As an analytical concept for exploring the social construction of place, place-making also has potential for highlighting the relation between place and power. As discussed above, power shapes relationships between people and place. Place-making has potential to create relationships between people and places, and to each other, in an empowering way, as

‘[i]t is a fundamental human activity that is sometimes almost invisible and sometimes dramatic. Place-making consists both of daily acts of renovating, maintaining, and representing the places that sustain us, and of special, celebratory one-time events such as designing a new church building or moving into a new facility. It can be done with the support of others or can be an act of defiance in the face of power’ (Schneekloth and Shibley 1995: 1).

Place-making therefore seems to entail a power dimension. As well as the potential for resistance suggested here, it may also involve domination; but rather than simplistic binaries of domination versus resistance, attention to place-making enables a more nuanced perspective on power relations. In viewing place as the site of complex entanglements of power, place-making offers an analytical focus through which to disentangle some of these complex relations. Through exploring the intricacies of residents’ and other actors’ place-making activities, it allows a view of politics and power relations within the neighbourhood – such as conflicts between neighbours – as well as in the city as a whole, such as adjacent neighbourhoods competing for resources, or political relations between different levels of government.

Place-making and place meaning

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

The idea of place as a 'mirror of self' implies that identity is somehow generated through place-making. Certainly, as outlined in earlier sections, place is held by phenomenological approaches to be constitutive of human identity. According to Relph (1976), place identity derives from the meaning that people confer on a given location based on their intentionality to carry out specific activities there. It is so close as to be inseparable from place image, which may be constructed individually or by groups (Relph 1976). The link between place identity and images (or features or icons) has been emphasised elsewhere as 'the "glue" of familiarity that binds people to place', and influences their connectedness to a place (Bruce Hull IV et al. 1994: 110). Alternatively, place identity has been defined as 'a cultural value shared by the community, a collective understanding about social identity intertwined with place meaning' (Harner 2001: 660). These accounts stress the social but also cultural dimension of place: imbuing place with meaning leads to the intersubjective construction of place identity and image, on an individual and societal level.

The idea of place meaning as symbolic of individual or collective experience seems particularly relevant in the context of urban informal settlements, where the incremental building process, which often takes place over the course of many years, results in houses that are containers of meaning and memory (Kellett 2002). Much more than just shelter, they express, through their layout, architecture and interior design, ideas about progress, identity and values (Kellett 2002). To paraphrase Young (1997 in Varley 2007: 35), place in this setting is important in its representation of effort and ownership, not in terms of private property but 'in the sense of meaningful use and reuse for life'. The physical embodies the social and the cultural, and provides the setting for these aspects of identity. In this sense, identity relates to narrative thread: rather than 'sameness in time', it refers to 'the capacity to generate meaning over time so as to hold past, present, and future together' (Benhabib 1999 in Varley 2007: 7). Kellett (2002: 28) remarks that 'squatters' consciousness of their low social position determines how '[t]heir efforts can be interpreted as a striving for dignity and respect'. Thus, place meanings express people's endeavours to transform the places in which they find themselves, usually on the basis of housing need and economic constraints, into the places in which they live, through everyday social processes of constructing and reconstructing space.

In this sense, Massey's (1991) observation that places have multiple rather than single identities seems particularly pertinent. As she points out, sense of place is not restricted to a bounded locality, but situated within wider processes and relations, including the city as a whole (Massey 1991). So place identity relates not only to the identities of people living in a place, through a sense of belonging, but also to the identification of a material and social setting where this sense can be expressed, and identities within the city as a whole. The idea of multiplicity and difference in place offers potential for exploring politics and power. Seeing place as a social process or through power relations means that differing values and the ways these are enacted are seen as an integral part of the meaning of place in the context of urban informal settlements.

Place-making, informality and effort

As an analytical lens, place-making offers a cross-cutting perspective on activities which are often categorised as *either* formal (such as planning by the state) *or* informal (such as land invasion by settlers). In this way, it offers a wider view of the influences involved in the spatial and social construction of place in this setting, without resorting to standard binary divisions. A place-making lens offers the potential to see all types of activity as equally valid objects of study in the construction of a particular place, in an effort to move beyond normative judgements often entailed by binary conceptions. It allows a perspective which cuts across scale, to include activities in which individuals, families, streets, committees, neighbourhoods, areas, representatives, municipal departments, and so on may all be involved. The benefit of a place-making perspective is that it values these analytical categories equally: therefore the individual place-making activities of one resident are as important as those of the city council, in analytical (although not necessarily normative) terms. The focus is provided by place, rather than by pre-ordained typologies or hierarchies of activities.

The objective of using an analytical focus on place, then, is to move away from *a priori* binary or normative conceptualisations. Taking a view of urban informal settlements as 'places in process' offers an alternative to the dualistic categories that views of informality entail, and the marginalising, 'othering' effects of dominant discourses. Place-making views the processes that occur in urban informal settlements as 'ordinary', in that they potentially occur everywhere, and thus avoids the formal/informal dualism outlined in the previous chapter. Instead of seeing places according to static, dualistic categorisations, place-making allows a view of the dynamic tensions that interact in a particular place. It also helps to avoid the homogenisation of urban informal settlements, by emphasising the situated, context-specific elements and processes of a particular place.

In particular, place-making is used here to capture the dimension of creativity and productive energy which is invested by the everyday users and producers of a place. If informality is understood as fluid and located in social processes, rather than in static

characteristics, informal settlements can be conceptualised as work in progress. As described in Chapter Two, these places are usually constructed on the basis of their residents' efforts in acquiring land, building houses, obtaining services and setting up networks. In the context of Mexican cities, then, place-making seems to offer an approach to reassessing 'the different social roles involved in the production of the city – of citizens, as well as administrative structures [as] [r]esidents of colonias populares undertake activities where their initiative and participation is fundamental' (Hernández Bonilla 2005: 198). Place-making may provide a way of viewing, reassessing and revaluing the residents' productive capacity and effort, which continues to be devalued due to the marginalisation of settlements where it occurs.

Part of the problem relating to the recognition of effort in this context may be the state's inability to acknowledge informal processes as place-making. From an official perspective, place-making (if not viewed as formal private sector development) is normally associated with 'planning', and 'participation' in planning, which is formally structured, initiated and implemented. Based on the premise that the making and re-making of places and environments are essential human activities, and that planning is an idea about what makes good places, it has been argued that 'planning is a societal activity, not a system' (Campbell 2002: 274). But others have defined planning as 'spatial public policies and practices' (Huxley and Yiftachel 2000: 334); and the longstanding association of 'planning' with regulatory systems (Campbell 2002) means that frequently, it fails to account for the multitude of other activities involved in the social and physical construction of place. Place-making, then, offers potential to capture activities involved in the construction of place, which overlap with, go beyond, or fall outside formal 'planning' in this sense.

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

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

remains an empty shell. And everywhere, seen or unseen, the state's presence is felt as a constraining influence on everyday life. The physical context for the patterns and rhythms of neighborhood life is controlled by the state'.

In this view, 'the state' attempts to regulate everyday life in the city, but this in turn 'lead[s] to resistance, contestations and actions that are often formally illegal' (Friedmann 2007: 261), under which latter heading much informal settlement is often perceived to fall. Friedmann emphasises the productive nature of this interaction between domination and resistance, in the form of place-making, asserting that 'in the end, some accommodations will be made as a place acquires its specific character, shaped not only from within itself but in response to the demands and decision of ... the state' (Friedmann 2007: 261).

This highlights the fact that agents of the state undeniably play a role in establishing and maintaining the structures which regulate citizens' activities in the urban context. In terms of place-making, this may be through the formulation and upholding of zoning laws, for example, but it may also be in more subtle ways, such as the involvement of residents in formal structures of citizen participation. While some have seen the potential of participation for empowerment (e.g. Arnstein 1969; Barr 1995), it has been subject to much criticism, as a method and normative tool. Particular criticisms of participation in planning have focused on its lack of an account of power (e.g. Goodman 1972; Tewdwr-Jones and Allmendinger 1998). Critics of participatory development have gone further, suggesting that it engenders 'tyranny' (Cooke and Kothari 2001), or that the largely cosmetic exercise of participation occurs as 'a "hegemonic" device used to secure compliance with, and control by, existing power structures' (Taylor 2001: 137).

In fact, as outlined in this section, place-making seems to offer ground from which to view the multiple, complex relationships that exist between individuals, organisations and institutions involved in the social and spatial construction of place. These relationships fluctuate, meaning that at times, certain actors may be more involved, while at other moments, different actors will dominate. Place-making therefore has the capacity to

uncover the complexity of social (and hence power) relations contained within the processes which affect urban informal settlements as places.

3.5 Conclusion

This chapter has suggested that 'place' may be used as an alternative analytical lens for understanding urban informal settlements. Given the research objective of exploring the complexity of urban informal settlements, through a focus on social processes, human geography's understanding of 'place' as a socio-spatial construct is extremely relevant. Two approaches to place which are useful in their emphasis of its social dimension are found in phenomenological and social constructionist (or critical social) theories. The phenomenological approach's usefulness relates to its humanistic perspective, which offers a focus on the lived experience of users and producers of a place. Social constructionist approaches take a more critical approach to issues of power in place, seeing place as the site for complex, entangled power relations, which is especially relevant in the context of marginalised neighbourhoods. Another strand of this approach emphasises the dynamic nature of place, as an ongoing process that is never complete, which also speaks to the idea of 'consolidation' of urban informal settlements as works in progress. These three strands of geographic approaches to place are brought together in 'place-making', which is suggested as an analytical lens. The objective of exploring urban informal settlements through place-making is to emphasise the creative elements of human action, and interaction, which are fundamental to constructing these places, as locations but also as sites of meaning.

As set out in Chapter One, the aim of this thesis is to critically examine understandings of urban informal settlements, through exploring the complexity of these places in terms of their discursive, spatial, social, cultural and political construction. The previous chapter's critique of conceptual and spatial binaries which are so often engendered in influential discourses of informality suggests a need for alternative ways of understanding the city. Existing accounts of informality, based on static and dualistic frameworks, fail to capture the complexity and dynamism of these places. Furthermore, these discourses have the

potential to reinforce and reproduce the existing marginalisation these places experience. Instead, a focus on place-making is suggested in order to explore lived experiences of urban informal settlements, and to see how these places compare to the assumptions and ideas which circulate about them, which may have tangible effects for urban residents. Seeing urban informal settlements as places constructed through the result of multiple influences over time – but especially based on residents' efforts – may reveal them to be as ordinary, and as complex, as anywhere else in the city. Robinson's (2002) conception of 'ordinariness' highlights diverse, creative, modern and distinctive qualities of place.

'Ordinary places', then, should be contextualised within the constraints of power relations, and potential conflict over place meaning; but they also contain the possibility for reinvention, creativity and dynamism, qualities that are not readily associated with the 'slums' of the discourses outlined in the previous chapter. On that basis, this chapter has proposed that instead of being seen as the disorderly, illegitimate, 'other' city, informal settlements could be seen as places in their own right, but also as places within the wider city. The social, cultural and political processes which influence place-making are inevitably affected by, and reflect, the context where they play out. The research setting of Mexico has particular implications for how informal settlement takes place there, and hence how this investigation has been carried out. With this in mind, the next chapter introduces the research setting, in order to contextualise the methodological approach and findings presented in later chapters.

CHAPTER 4: URBAN INFORMAL SETTLEMENTS IN MEXICO: *COLONIAS POPULARES*

Poor Mexico, so far from God and so near to the United States!
Porfirio Diaz 1830-1915 (attributed)

Introduction

Situated between the United States and Latin America, Mexico is increasingly considered a part of North rather than Central America (Heritage 2004). However, it is reflective of much of Latin America, which is characterised by highly unequal societies, middle-income status and high levels of urbanisation (Gilbert and Crankshaw 1999). Despite its relatively stable economy and political system, urban informal settlements (in the form of *colonias populares*) have been a fixture on the urban landscape for decades. Rapid urbanisation, inadequate formal housing provision and high levels of inequality have all contributed to a situation where ‘in Mexican cities over one-half of the built-up area began as colonias, [which] represent the *only* affordable low-income housing option for over 60 per cent of the population’ (Ward 1999: 4, original emphasis).

In this sense, then, Mexico is often considered to be part of the ‘global South’, and presents fertile ground for exploring the complexity of urban informal settlements. The aim of this chapter is to contextualise some of the issues arising from previous chapters in the research setting of Mexico, specifically relating to Xalapa, the medium-sized city where the case study *colonias* are located. As well as offering a less abstract, more situated discussion of those issues, this chapter also highlights salient considerations in the context of these locally contingent forms of wider urban phenomena. Focusing on different scales, from the national to the municipal and finally the neighbourhood, the discussion also reveals certain social, political and cultural processes which are less well understood in this context. These gaps in existing knowledge refined the research focus in this particular setting.

The chapter is divided into four sections. It opens with a discussion of the main issues underpinning the construction of urban informality in Mexico over the last five decades. A

changing urban landscape, in economic, political and administrative terms, is the backdrop for urban growth and housing trends contributing to high levels of informal development, bolstered by a vigorous informal land market and spatial policies such as large-scale tenure regularisation. Xalapa is in many ways typical of urban landscapes across Mexico: it has experienced rapid urban growth and high levels of informal settlement, generating particular responses from local policy makers, discussed in section two. The latter half of the chapter introduces the two case study *colonias* in terms of the supposed characteristics of urban informal settlements, outlined in earlier chapters. The first neighbourhood, Colonia Loma Bonita, is introduced via a discussion of its key physical, historic, infrastructural and socio-economic characteristics. The second case study, Colonia Moctezuma, is presented in a similar way. The aim of this discussion is to explore characteristics of these particular places in the light of the broad research themes, as the basis for specific research questions.

4.1: The construction of urban informality in Mexico

This section gives a broad overview of the context of urban informal settlement in Mexican cities. The economic, political and administrative changes that Mexico is currently undergoing have had effects on the urban landscape and urban government. The prevalence of *colonias populares* in Mexico is related to specific characteristics of certain structures in this context, such as formal housing provision and land markets based on the *ejidal* system.

Mexico's changing urban context

Mexico's political, economic and administrative structures are still shaped by the legacies of the country's authoritarian era. Although this officially ended in 2000, the one-party state which entailed 70 years of government by the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) fostered a political culture based on corporatism¹³, social segmentation and organisational

¹³ Corporatism has been defined, rather benignly, as 'a formal relationship between selected groups or institutions and the government or state' (Camp 2003: 12). It has also been seen as a 'political structure that tend[ed] to eliminate competition for power and emphasize conciliation among different societal groups through their vertical or subordinated relationship with the state apparatus' (Reyna 1977 in Guarneros-Meza 2009: 467).

fragmentation, as strategies to maintain central government control (Guarneros-Meza 2009). Legacies of this culture prevail in the urban context, influenced by more recent macro-level processes of neoliberalisation, democratisation and decentralisation.

Neoliberalisation

'Neoliberalisation'¹⁴ has occurred in Mexico as across much of Latin America, against a historic background of uneven economic development and high inequality. The post-war era in Mexico was one of dynamic economic growth, but at considerable social cost. Import substitution industrialisation, which promoted inward-orientated economic growth through protectionist policies for the domestic industry, brought periods of remarkable economic expansion across Latin America (Munck 2005; Perreault and Martin 2005). But uneven development, economic instability (including inflation) and increasing authoritarianism contributed to social unrest in Mexico, manifested in the rise of urban social movements and land invasions. In 1982, Mexico defaulted on debt payments, triggering a series of economic crises across the region which lasted into the next decade, reaching another crux in 1994 with the devaluation of the peso. Neoliberal economic policies were adopted as a crisis response, in line with the prevailing political wisdom, based on economic restructuring and greater integration into the world market through limited state intervention regarding foreign trade, public finance and investment (Guarneros-Meza 2009). Mexico's signature of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994 is emblematic of its 'neoliberalisation', as well as evidence of closer economic and political alignment with the United States (Fernández-Armesto 2004).

However, the economic crises of the 1980s and 1990s were accompanied by increasing inequality in the distribution of income, and a decline in living standards for much of the population (Graizbord and Aguilar 2006: 92). Table 4.1 shows that absolute numbers of poor people increased between 1980 and 1999. Although there was a small decline in the number of households in poverty from 1990 to 1999, it did not return to 1980 (i.e. pre-crisis) levels. Moreover, taking into account the differentiation within poverty highlighted

¹⁴ Neoliberalism is commonly thought of as an economic and political project which aims to liberalise trade, privatise state-controlled industries, and introduce market-orientated management to a reduced public sector (Perreault and Martin 2005: 192).

by this table, it can be seen that absolute numbers of people living in indigence (or extreme poverty), not able to satisfy their basic food needs, increased over this period, and the proportion of population this represented barely decreased.

Table 4.1: Poverty and indigence in Mexico, 1980-1999

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

Poverty refers to households with a daily income of less than \$41.80 Mexican pesos (around £2 at the time of the research), the minimum estimated family income to satisfy basic food, health, education and transport needs in 2000. Indigence (or extreme poverty) refers to the condition of not having enough income to provide for minimum food requirements.

Source: adapted from Graizbord and Aguilar 2006: 93

In fact, some have argued that processes of neoliberalisation have been a causal factor in these trends, as they ‘both reflect and produce spatial and scalar differentiation, intensifying processes of uneven development’ (Perreault and Martin 2005: 194). Certainly, many observers agree that this has been the case in Mexico (e.g. Meyers 2003; Ortiz Flores 2003; Arias Hernández 2007). Income distribution in Mexico remains highly unequal: in 2004, the top 10 per cent of the population received 40 per cent of income, while the bottom 20 per cent of the population received three per cent (World Bank 2004). In 2005, 41 per cent of Mexico’s population of 106 million were below the poverty line; fewer than 1999, when the proportion was almost 47 per cent, but indicative of extreme, enduring disparities in wealth (Graizbord and Aguilar 2006). During 2007, protests in many cities at escalating prices for basic goods such as maize and oil, due to the removal of trade tariffs under NAFTA, exemplified its effects, as well as the continuing levels of hardship and poverty in Mexico (Arias Hernández 2007).

Mexico’s persistently high levels of inequality were emphasised by polarised voting in the 2006 presidential election, which current President Calderón, of the PAN (National Action

Party), won by less than one per cent (with 35.9 per cent of the vote against left-wing candidate Lopez Obrador's 35.3 per cent). The split vote was indicative of the divided electorate. Rather than a shift to the left as predicted by some analysts (Cornwell 2005), the country has remained dominated by the old political elite, while civil unrest following the election, for example in Oaxaca¹⁵ and Atenco¹⁶, shows that large sectors of the population still feel disenfranchised. Calderón's narrow mandate, compounded by accusations of electoral fraud, provides a weak base from which to address other important issues, including migration policy and drug crime (Kennedy 2006). During the 2000-2006 PAN administration, 500,000 Mexicans migrated illegally to the United States every year (Reid 2007: 211); and in 2007, remittances represented Mexico's second biggest source of income after petroleum (Arias Hernández 2007). Meanwhile, escalating violence has followed President Calderón's attempts to crack down on the drugs trade: in the last three years, 11,000 people have been murdered in episodes of *narcoviencia* (The Economist 2008; Tuckman 2009).

Democratisation

Mexico's transition to democracy is still relatively recent (Camp 2003). The country's first democratic elections were held in 2000, although it has been suggested that the transition began in the 1980s, as urban movements across the country triggered the disintegration of the PRI's regime (Guarneros-Meza 2009); or even further back in the 1960s, when social unrest culminated in the 1968 massacre of student protestors in Mexico City in 1968, resolving the immediate protests but ultimately undermining the regime's legitimacy (Cosío Villegas et al. 1985). The PRI era fostered a culture of clientelism, paternalism and co-optation, and the end of this effective dictatorship in 2000 was heralded by the winning PAN (and the majority of the electorate who voted against the PRI) as a new era of political plurality and anti-corruption. Three main parties (the PRI, the centre-right PAN, and the left-wing PRD) now dominate the political scene. But Mexico remains divided along

¹⁵ In the spring of 2006, in the southern state capital of Oaxaca, protests against the allegedly corrupt State Governor led to widespread strikes, culminating in violent conflict between protestors and federal forces.

¹⁶ In May 2006, the town of San Salvador Atenco in the State of Mexico was stormed by armed federal police in reaction to local protests about the eviction of informal traders from the town centre (Salinas et al. 2006).

economic, social and ideological lines, with its democratic culture perhaps less consolidated or representative than it initially seemed (Gledhill 2006).

Urban social movements have played an important role in Mexico's democratisation. Groups like the Urban Popular Movement (MUP) and *Tierra y Libertad*, which encouraged land invasions and community self-organisation, have represented a means of claiming rights from the state, and developing innovative ways of providing urban services to their communities (e.g. Moctezuma 2001). It has been argued that in much of Latin America, '[u]rban movements contributed to the discourse of democratization through the engagement and empowerment of grassroots groups in the participation of service provision (Guarneros-Meza 2009: 470). Ironically, 25 years later, these self-determined forms of organisation – which derive from and are associated with informal settlements – have been adopted by local governments in current discourses of democratisation. This is given expression through participatory processes at the municipal level, as part of a more general trend towards decentralisation (discussed in more detail in Chapter Seven).

Decentralisation

As a federal republic, Mexico is administratively and politically divided into 32 states and more than 2,400 municipalities (Graizbord and Aguilar 2006). Federalism and decentralisation have accompanied democratisation, as improved electoral competition and the transfer of fiscal and political powers since the 1980s have led to greater autonomy at subnational levels of government (Camp 2003; Rocha Menocal 2005; Guarneros-Meza 2009). An example of this can be seen with large scale welfare programmes such as PRONASOL¹⁷ and PROGRESA¹⁸ (renamed *Oportunidades* in 2002), held up by the federal government as proof of progress in terms of (fiscal) decentralisation (Rocha Menocal 2005). This is partly because in Mexico, welfare spending has long been linked to

¹⁷ PRONASOL or the National Solidarity Programme was a welfare programme created in 1989 by President Salinas de Gortari, in the context of neoliberal economic restructuring. It represented a move from universal protection to more targeted, selective assistance, channelling funds for public works to impoverished rural and urban communities (Rocha Menocal 2005).

¹⁸ PROGRESA or the Education, Health and Nutrition Programme, which represented a radical reduction in federal welfare provision, was launched in 1997 by President Zedillo, and aimed at allowing households living in extreme poverty to meet their basic necessities (Rocha Menocal 2005).

clientelism and patronage, part of a populist political strategy of using federal welfare policies to generate votes (Rocha Menocal 2005). In a similar fashion, the extension of electricity infrastructure to many areas under the Salinas de Gortari administration (1988 to 1994) was seen as an attempt to politically manipulate the poor (Siembieda and Lopez Moreno 1997).

While in the last two decades, observers have noted increased responsiveness and less politicisation at the federal level, this has not necessarily translated into improved developmental outcomes at the local level, as lack of capacity and accountability means that municipalities are still vulnerable to criticisms of clientelism and patronage (Rocha Menocal 2005). These processes of neoliberalisation, democratisation and decentralisation have interacted with and influenced patterns of urban growth, with particular implications for the development of *colonias populares*.

Urban growth and housing patterns

Mexico is an urban nation, with around 75 per cent of its population living in urban areas (Heritage 2004). From 1900 to 1980, rapid unplanned urbanisation occurred, mainly due to high levels of rural-urban migration which accompanied industrialisation and economic growth (see Table 4.2). While renting (mostly in tenements or *vecindades*) was common for the first half of the twentieth century, since the 1950s there has been a trend towards owner-occupancy, through squatter settlement in the 1940s and 1950s, and more recently through illegal subdivision. Faced with explosive urban growth, formal housing provision in Mexico has struggled to meet demand, creating a situation where 'at least 60 per cent of the urban population lives in areas developed by the illegal occupation of land that subsequently receives services and supports self-built (or rather, self-financed) housing' (Connolly et al. 2003), known as *colonias populares*.

Table 4.2: Urban growth in Mexico, 1900-1980

	<i>Population of 25 largest cities (thousands)</i>	<i>% of national population</i>	<i>% increase over previous census</i>
1900	1,260	9.2	-
1910	1,561	10.3	23.9
1920	1,858	13.0	19.0
1930	2,529	15.3	36.1
1940	3,345	17.0	32.3
1950	5,706	22.2	70.6
1960	10,526	30.2	84.5
1970	16,919	34.5	60.7
1980	26,504	38.7	54.0

Source: Gilbert and Varley 1989: 17

The failure of the public housing sector to provide affordable housing for the majority of Mexico's population who earn low wages can be identified as a primary cause of high levels of informal settlement. The complex national housing finance system is unable to meet demand and does not cater adequately for the low-income sector (Connolly et al. 2003). During the 1980s, Mexico developed low-income housing programmes including sites-and-services, core housing and mutual aid projects, based on land reserves accrued by public institutions, but this was eliminated under World Bank influence (Connolly et al. 2003), with policies aimed at a more efficient housing market.

Since the 1990s the federal government has increasingly promoted market-orientated housing policies. These policies have focused on providing finished housing as a product, and have tended to result in 'vast tracts of homogenous housing built by the private sector ... whose purchase is facilitated by 20- or 30- year loans provided through the banking sector and housing funds of private- and public-sector workers' (Wigle and Zarate 2008: 7). An example of this type of housing can be seen in Photo 4.1. This production process resulted in 560,000 new houses in Mexico in 2006, backed by the Federal Mortgage Society (*Sociedad Hipotecaria Federal*), producing huge profits for private developers (Wigle and Zarate 2008). However, despite the bewildering array of middle-income

housing finance schemes – such as FOVISSSTE, FOVI, FOGA and INFONAVIT¹⁹ – most Mexicans do not earn enough to qualify for them; and those who do face high personal debt and increased socio-economic vulnerability. A 1997 study calculated a ‘housing deficit’ of more than 3 million units, meaning that over 80 per cent of the population could not afford to participate in the national mortgage finance system (Siembieda and Lopez Moreno 1997: 652).

Photo 4.1: INFONAVIT-style housing in Mexico City (www.imagenesaereasdemexico.com)



Ward (1999) asserts that in Mexico, three modes of housing production can be identified: private, public and ‘popular’²⁰. The private formal housing sector is occupied almost exclusively by upper-income groups, in the form of subdivisions, apartments and condominiums. Middle-income groups have access to less grandiose private housing, financed through the mortgage and public housing funds mentioned above. For the low-income families who make up the remainder and bulk of Mexico’s population, most of whom do not have access to public sector housing, the only option is ‘popular’ housing, which could arguably also be considered part of the private sector (Ward 1999).

¹⁹ Government-sponsored public housing funds for public sector workers, based on contributions. INFONAVIT is the largest housing programme in Mexico, funding construction with salaried workers’ contributions. The minimum income for participation is three times the minimum wage, which excludes around 50 per cent of the Mexican population according to some estimates (Enrique Ortiz Flores 08.11.06).

²⁰ ‘Popular’ is taken to mean ‘of the masses’, the sense in which it is used in Spanish.

Popular housing is based on three primary principles:

‘first, a considerable amount of work provided by the housing occupants themselves; second, the state’s tolerance of the illegal status of most housing settlements; and third, investment by speculative private capital operating outside the legal limits through a variety of intermediaries’ (Castells 1983 in Ward 1999: 68).

So *colonias populares*, such as those seen in Photo 4.2, are characterised by cheaply acquired land, inadequate infrastructure, and self-help dwelling construction (Ward 1999). The ‘consumer’ and builder or controller of construction are one and the same, meaning he or she is free to translate their priorities into the housing (Ward 1999).

Photo 4.2: *Colonias populares* in Mexico City (Melanie Lombard)



Colonias populares are often developed on former agricultural land. Because of this, they have been described as part of the peri-urban fringe, which is neither rural nor urban, but nevertheless an integral part of the city (Aguilar 2008). Despite initially poor physical conditions, they have comparatively good prospects for upgrading and ‘gradually

integrating ... into the physical fabric of the city' (Ward 1999: 4), through consolidation processes. *Colonia* residents normally demand land titles and public services through petitioning via official channels, a process seen by some as demand-making, which 'very often constitutes a long and frequently unsuccessful activity for residents (Aguilar 1988: 42). Due to lack of government support, alternative infrastructure arrangements often exist (Moctezuma 2001), based on processes of self-organisation fostered by urban social movements and grassroots groups, as mentioned above. Alternatively, the community may collectively pay private companies for services such as road maintenance, again demonstrating residents' capacity to improve neighbourhood conditions without state assistance (Siembieda and Lopez Moreno 1997: 674).

Initially seen as a temporary aberration relating to rapid urbanisation, *colonias populares* are now viewed as part of the housing sector in Mexico. In the 1960s, they were met with policies of eviction, limited formal housing projects, and *laissez-faire* attitudes or neglect on the part of the authorities. During the mid-1970s, policies embraced the self-help philosophy, with small-scale interventions to legalise titles, provide services, support community organisations, generate small credit, and create housing sector agencies (Ward 1999). In the 1980s, streamlining and integration of programmes with national housing legislation occurred, with federal initiatives applied at state and local level, and an increased focus on rental/non-owner housing and interventions (Ward 1999). As part of Mexico's neoliberalisation, the 1990s saw World Bank orthodoxy, in the form of new urban management policy, seeking to incorporate *colonias* into the urban fiscal and regulatory base (Ward 1999: 7).

Faced with the vast scale and intractable nature of *colonias populares*, governments have recently focused on responding to infrastructure needs and regularisation of land tenure to encourage investment (Ward 1999). In fact, the new Housing Law (*Ley de Vivienda*) passed in 2006 recognised the fundamental role that the 'social production of housing' (in *colonias populares*) plays in providing shelter for the poor, and recommended that the government support it; but this has yet to be backed up by resource commitments (Ortiz Flores 2003; Wigle and Zarate 2008). In particular, state responses to informal settlement should be

considered in the light of the fact that for many years ‘[i]n Mexico, land and housing production have been part and parcel of the political process’ (Ward 1999: 78). While this is not uncommon in Latin America, it is also predicated on specific political, legal and cultural characteristics of the Mexican context, including the macro-level processes outlined above, but also the *ejidal* land market.

The role of the *ejidos*

Observers generally agree that *ejidal* land has been the most important source of land for development in Mexican cities, and that it is usually developed illegally (Austin 1994; Varley 1998). This has been the case since the 1970s, when alternative forms of illegal land supply came under more effective control by the state (Ward 1999). An *ejido* comprises of land owned communally by farmers under Mexican law dating from the agrarian reforms of the 1920s and 1930s. *Ejidors* normally incorporate an ‘urban zone’ where farmers and their families live and services are provided, alongside the commonly-held agricultural land (see Photo 4.3). In 1997, *ejidos* comprised 55 per cent of the total land area of Mexico (Siembieda and Lopez Moreno 1997: 658). The various mechanisms of illegal development of *ejidal* land include exchange, zone development, invasion and sale to intermediaries, and up to 50 per cent of total land development in Mexico has occurred in this way (Austin 1994).

Photo 4.3: The *zona urbana* of the Ejido Chiltoyac, near Xalapa (Melanie Lombard)



The origins of the *ejidal* system date back to pre-Columbian land ownership patterns, where land was held in common by a village (Ward 1999). Even after the Spanish conquest in the sixteenth century, this land was considered inalienable. *Ejidors* became significant because of the postrevolution Constitution of 1917 and the subsequent Agrarian Reform Programme, which broke up large estates owned by the elites, often dating from the colonial era (*haciendas* or *latifundios*), and redistributed the land to named peasant families living there. This established the *ejidos* as ‘agrarian communities in which peasants have use rights over the land (i.e., it is social property that cannot be sold or alienated in any way)’ (Ward 1999: 71), a form which has largely endured. Land was redistributed under this programme up to the early 1980s, when President Lopez Portillo ended the process. By the 1990s there were 28,000 *ejidos*, occupying over half of Mexico’s arable land and employing 3 million *ejidatarios* (Austin 1994). The importance of the *ejidos* – alongside the provision of land for development – lies in their autonomous status, which has afforded them substantial political and institutional power in a corporatist political context.

Prior to reforms in the 1990s, agricultural lands collectively owned by *ejidatarios* could only be transferred between family members, guaranteeing that families would always have at least some land to work (Stolle-McAllister 2005). Much *ejidal* land was scrub or for grazing rather than agrarian use, meaning it came under increasing development pressure due to its location on the peripheries of rapidly urbanising cities (Ward 1999). In the context of Mexico’s neoliberalisation, agricultural producers have been affected by their inability to compete in a more open market, leading to increasing rural poverty and migration, and the consequent sale of *ejidal* land (Velázquez Álvarez 2007). By the time of reforms in 1992²¹, much *ejidal* land had already been sold illegally for urban expansion and low-income housing. In effect, the *ejido* system of Mexico has acted as a low-cost, illegal land market allowing land acquisition for the poor (Azuela and Duhau 1998); although it has also been suggested that reforms represented a missed opportunity for state

²¹ Under President Salinas de Gortari, the 1992 amendment of Article 27 of the Constitution reformed the *ejidal* system. Based on a census of *ejidal* land, PROCEDE (the *Ejidal* Rights Certification Programme) assigned formalised titles to all owners, giving them the right to legally sell, but not subdivide their land parcels (subject to the approval of the *ejido*’s general assembly) (Austin 1994).

development of land supply for the low-income population (Ward 1989). It should be noted, however, that far from being restricted to the poor, this form of land supply has benefitted large-scale urban developers and wealthy investors. In one well-known case, ex-President Fox (of the PAN) obtained a piece of land for development in an *ejidal* zone located in one of the most picturesque areas of the Pacific coast (Hernández Quintero 2005).

Ejidal land is normally sold through subdivision, often at prices that are much lower than the formal market, due to its lack of infrastructure (Siembieda and Lopez Moreno 1997). In the most common form of land transaction, settlers buy land from *ejidatarios* (either directly or via intermediaries) in transactions which are 'non-existent' in law (Azuela and Duhau 1998: 159). Despite some predictions that the reforms would end illegal land development, this seems unlikely. Research carried out by Jones and Ward (1998: 82) in *ejidos* at the peri-urban fringe of Puebla indicated that 'at least until early 1996, it has been largely "business as usual"' as regards illegal land development. *Ejidos* at the urban periphery continue to sell land, some believing that it is now a legal transaction, often persuaded by the *coyotes*²² whose new role is 'to convince *ejidatarios* that it is their land, and theirs to sell', even before the *ejidatarios* have received legal title (Jones and Ward 1998: 86).

The widespread illegal development of the *ejidos* has led to the creation of 'a large federal and state bureaucracy responsible for the *post hoc* regularisation of former *ejidal* land' (Austin 1994: 427). Land tenure regularisation has become a routine form of state intervention in low-income housing, through one of the most ambitious and long-established land tenure regularisation programmes in the world, which by the 1980s had benefitted more than 1.3 million residents in Mexico City alone (Azuela and Duhau 1998). CORETT (the Commission for the Regularisation of Land Tenure), the federal agency with responsibility for regularising *ejidal* land, was established in 1974 (Azuela and Duhau 1998). Regularisation is effected through a presidential decree expropriating the land from the *ejido* in favour of CORETT, which then sells the land to individual residents and

²² Intermediaries in the land deal, often suspected of fraudulent activity.

compensates the *ejidatarios*. Settlers thus pay for the land twice; and the regularisation process is dependent on the government's volition (Azuela and Duhau 1998).

As in the case of other pro-poor programmes in Mexico, there have been concerns about the exploitation of regularisation for populist political ends. Its systematic use from the 1970s onwards has been seen as a response to political and economic problems facing the government, and a strategy to bring about the social and political integration of the urban poor (Varley 1998); or as a "safety valve", such that urban development has proceeded in a relatively peaceful fashion' (Austin 1994: 330); or even as a tool for co-opting opposition movements (Azuela and Duhau 1998). Regularisation has also protected the illegal land market, thereby reducing state control of urban expansion, and has had the apparently contradictory effect of promoting illegality at the same time as removing it (Azuela and Duhau 1998). The division of a city into 'legal' and 'illegal' areas implies not all individuals are subject to the same rules, and entails profound social inequalities, which have become accepted as a 'natural' feature of urban society (Azuela and Duhau 1998). In this sense, regularisation could be seen as a state policy which contributes to the construction of informality, and dualistic conceptions of the 'formal/informal' (or 'legal/illegal') city, as discussed in Chapter Two. In fact, illegal subdivision of *ejidal* land is not the only form of informal development in Mexico, as revealed in later sections; but it plays an important role in discourses about urban informal settlements there.

Planning and spatial policies

Beyond regularisation, a number of other regulatory frameworks play an important role in the low-income housing production process in Mexico. Several laws deal with land and housing production, enacted through the top-down legal system: first at the national level, then potentially adopted by the 32 sovereign states, for application at state and municipality level (Ward 1999). These include the Human Settlements Law (*Ley General de Asentamientos Humanos*), which outlines the responsibilities of all levels of government in urban areas, regulating property, land use, private land expropriation and urban housing. This is supported by Federal Housing Law (*Ley de Vivienda*), aimed at decreasing

speculation and new irregular settlement, and the Subdivisions Law (*Ley de Fraccionamiento*), which regulates residential subdivisions. Finally, the Urban Development Law (*Ley de Desarrollo Urbano*) gives general guidance on role of planning and urban development policy. The first Human Settlements Law was formulated in 1976, along with the foundation of SAHOP (the Ministry of Human Settlements and Public Works) which created the first National Urban Development Plan (PNDU), which is published every five years and covers mainly land use planning (Leal de la Macorra 1998). Since the 1980s, responsibility for urban development plans has been decentralised to all levels of government. The federal department currently responsible for urban planning in Mexico is SEDESOL, the Ministry of Social Development (Jones and Ward 1998).

As suggested by this complex legal framework, planning in Mexico tends to be fragmented and disparate; furthermore, it focuses heavily on quantitative rather than qualitative outcomes, and economic factors above all else (Leal de la Macorra 1998; Connolly et al. 2003). Elsewhere, it has been described as ‘more decorative than indicative’ (Ward 1990: 114), and as having been ‘largely reduced to corrective measures’ (Dredge 1995: 320), due to its inefficiency, unresponsiveness, and lack of capacity to strategically guide urban growth. The elimination of low-income housing programmes developed in the 1980s hampered planning’s ability to enable equitable and sustainable urban development (Connolly et al. 2003). Furthermore, despite decentralisation processes, public policy remains highly centralised in practice, and ‘as a result, the urban and social agendas of different levels of government are often competing rather than complementary, and are always insufficient to meet demand’ (Connolly et al. 2003).

In order to address this, the PNDU 1995-2000 identified as a key strategy ‘the need to upgrade and improve the human and financial administrative capacities of local government, particularly in the land development area’ (Jones and Ward 1998: 87). Several measures for local municipalities were outlined, such as updated land records and registry (for greater tax revenues), more efficient systems of licences and building permits, greater transparency and accountability, and official ‘civil service’ positions in planning and registry offices (Jones and Ward 1998: 87). However, the continued lack of municipal

modernisation in many areas across Mexico is likely to hamper this bid for improved governance at the local level (Jones and Ward 1998). In particular,

‘the three year non-renewable terms for municipal presidents, combined with the traditional wholesale turnover of a senior administrative personnel, undermines continuity and the development of a professional cadre of planners, land registry officials, cadastral assessors and managers, and other land-use officers’ (Jones and Ward 1998: 87).

Against this backdrop, moves towards more decentralised government are seen by some as heightening the risk of abuses due to local authority weakness, incompetence and corruption (Jones and Ward 1998). On the other hand, decentralisation of urban policy at the municipal level has been accompanied by increased citizen participation in some areas, along the lines of involvement in service provision fostered by urban social movements in the 1980s. This issue is explored in more detail in Chapter Seven’s analysis of local Citizen Participation policy.

The section has shown how changes in Mexico’s urban context have been influenced by wider economic, political and administrative changes. Urban growth patterns are often blamed for the large scale development of *colonias populares*, but inadequate housing provision and high levels of inequality can also be seen as the product of neoliberal economic policies, and a reflection of powerful prevailing interests. As regularisation of illegally subdivided *ejidal* land has become *the* low-income housing policy in Mexico, the state could be seen as complicit in the construction of informality. While policies at the municipal level may be aimed at the integration of these places through participation and other measures, it is unclear what impact these processes have on the lived experiences of *colonia* residents. The development of *colonias populares* is also influenced by local specificities, explored in the next section in the context of Xalapa.

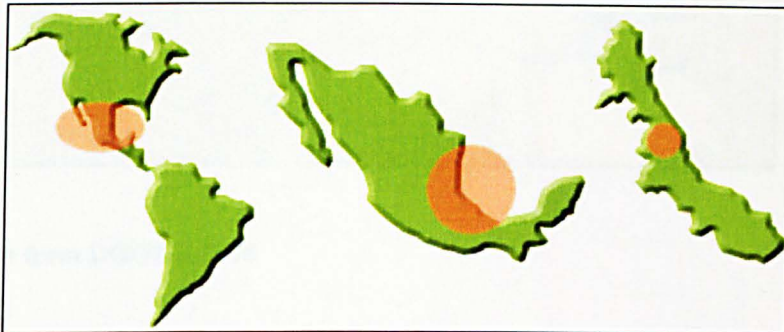
4.2 Colonias populares in Xalapa

This section introduces Xalapa, the city where the research was carried out, as the specific setting for some of the issues outlined above. The city's status as regional capital means it has experienced rapid urban growth in recent decades, related to the effects of economic reforms on surrounding rural areas, and leading to high levels of informal settlement.

'The Athens of Veracruz'

Xalapa is a medium-sized city with a population of 413,000 (INEGI 2005), the capital of the State of Veracruz, located in the east of Mexico (see Figure 4.1). As one of around 100 medium-sized cities in Mexico, it is representative of the urban areas in which the majority of Mexican people live (Meyers 2003).

Figure 4.1: Location of Mexico, Veracruz State and Xalapa



Source: www.xalapa.gob.mx

As the State capital, Xalapa functions as a regional administrative, commercial and financial centre (Amezcuea Cardiel 1990). The city is situated 1,200 metres above sea level, 120 kilometres inland from the port city of Veracruz on the coast of the Gulf of Mexico (see Figure 4.2). Its altitude, mountainous conditions and the surrounding mesophytic forest give the city a temperate climate, which contrasts sharply with the 'Caribbean' atmosphere (both climatic and cultural) found in the city of Veracruz, Mexico's most important port. Xalapa's position on the main route between Veracruz and Mexico City has also shaped its

The State of Veracruz has a highly dispersed urban population, spread across 10 medium-sized cities and hundreds of small settlements, owing to the region’s agricultural character (Amezcuca Cardiel 1990). Because of the dispersed population, service provision is costly, and levels of wellbeing across the State – based on age, schooling, employment and housing conditions – are low (Graizbord and Aguilar 2006: 96-8). The State also has high levels of out-migration, primarily to the United States (Velázquez Álvarez 2007a). As the capital of Veracruz, Xalapa is symbolically representative of the State’s former primacy in agricultural production, and it has received much of the rural-urban migration generated by agricultural decline, which has affected the city’s growth.

Table 4.3: Total population growth for Xalapa and Veracruz State, 1950-2000

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

Source: adapted from Villanueva and Olmeda 2002: 15

Xalapa has experienced significant growth since the 1960s (see Table 4.3). Since the 1980s, increasing numbers of ‘rural refugees of economic reform’ (Meyers 2003: 77) have added to its population, with social and economic consequences which are discussed in detail below. Xalapa is a demographically young city, with 58 per cent of its population under 30 (INEGI 2005). It has a relatively high level of secondary education, with a literacy index of 95 per cent for over-fifteens, and an average of eight years’ education, above the Veracruz State average of 7.2 years (INEGI 2005). The city also has a higher than average number of university graduates within its overall population.

Photo 4.4: Xalapa city centre (Melanie Lombard)



In fact, Xalapa has long cultivated its identity as the ‘Athens of Veracruz’²³ and the ‘City of Flowers’ (Velázquez Álvarez 2007b): the academic and cultural centre of Veracruz, as well as its administrative capital (see Photo 4.4 and Figure 4.3). This is partly due to the State’s most important academic institutions being located there: the *Escuela Normal Veracruzana*, the first teacher training college in Mexico, founded in 1886²⁴; and the *Universidad Veracruzana*, one of the most important public universities in Mexico, established in 1944. Compared with other Mexican cities of its size and importance, the educated sector of Xalapa constitutes a significant proportion of the population. However, the city’s ‘official’ cultural life promotes mainly fine arts in the Western tradition, which has perhaps led to other cultural influences there either being overlooked, or in some cases, appropriated as part of the ‘official’ story²⁵.

²³ See for example <http://www.xalapa.gob.mx/> [accessed 2 April 2009].

²⁴ This has particular significance within Mexican cultural history, as the establishment of the *Escuela Normal* system meant that individuals training as teachers could access knowledge to pass on to rural communities.

²⁵ This has arguably been the case with Son Jarocho, a musical genre which originated in the south of the State and is related to Caribbean music, which is often promoted and performed in Xalapa (Ahtziri Molina, personal communication, 30 September 2009).

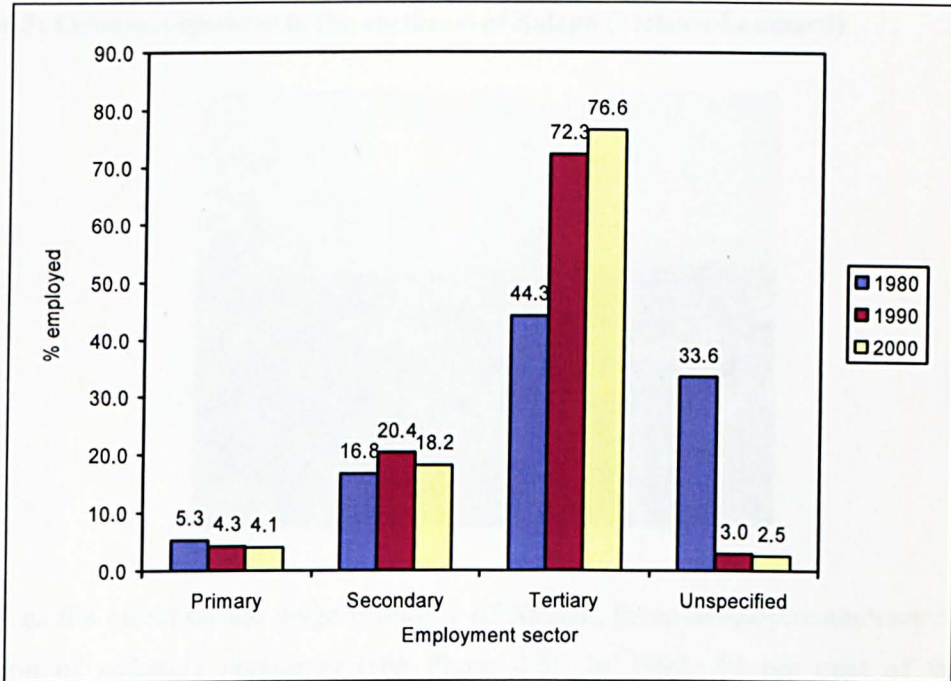
Figure 4.3: Map of central Xalapa



Source: Municipal Tourist Office, Xalapa

The city's role as State capital since the eighteenth century has also been important in shaping it. Due to a relative absence of any manufacturing industry, since the mid-twentieth century, its economy has been based on the commerce and service functions of the tertiary sector (see Figure 4.4). This employs the majority of the city's workforce, specifically in property and government bureaucracy (Meyers 2003). However, Mexico's general programme of economic and state reform has affected the population and built environment of Xalapa, disrupting the local economy and pauperising the majority of residents, while simultaneously accelerating ongoing elite-fuelled property speculation (Meyers 2003).

Figure 4.4: Economically active population by employment sector in Xalapa, 1980-2000



Source: Villanueva and Olmeda 2002: 18

The result of economic downturns due to the structural adjustment and financial crises of the 1980s and 1990s was the informalisation of Xalapa’s economy. This in turn led to worsening living conditions and declining health for the majority of the population, which meant acute social and economic crisis for many (Meyers 2003). The influx of people arriving from the surrounding rural areas contributed to an increase in the city’s population from 205,000 to 336,000 from 1980 to 1995, of which 50 per cent was due to migration (Meyers 2003). In 1990, nearly 62 per cent of the workforce earned less than twice the minimum wage²⁶, which is the level of income calculated as sufficient for basic needs (Meyers 2003). In 2005, 58 per cent of the population earned below this level (INEGI 2005), indicating that incomes are increasing, but slowly.

²⁶ In July 2009, one daily minimum wage was around \$52 pesos, equal to about £2.57 at the time of writing.

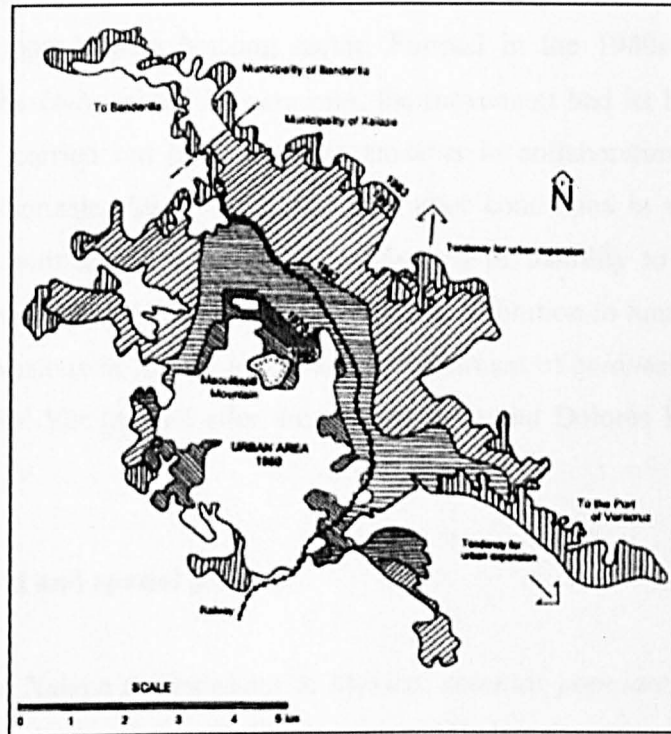
Urban growth and *colonias populares*

Photo 4.5: *Colonias populares* in the northeast of Xalapa (Melanie Lombard)



As well as the effect on the wage economy of Xalapa, these developments have meant an expansion of *colonias populares* (see Photo 4.5). In 1990, 50 per cent of the city's population lived in *colonias*: 39 per cent of households were without water in their homes, and 37 per cent were not connected to the municipal sewerage system (Meyers 2003). In local discourses, *colonias populares* are often portrayed as having been a determining factor in Xalapa's urban development of the last few decades, part of a pattern of rapid, uncontrolled expansion, as seen in local media reports (e.g. Arias Hernández 2007; Velázquez Álvarez 2007b). However, the cityscape reflects not only rapid urban growth and high levels of poverty, but also the speculative development of the real-estate owners, in 'a pattern of social and spatial segregation typical of capitalist urbanisation' (Meyers 2003: 73). Much of the land in the east, southeast and centre of the city is controlled by a few elite families, such as the Fernandez family, who built a coffee-producing empire in the early twentieth century, and are believed to own approximately 50 per cent of the city centre (Meyers 2003). In the north and west of the city, low-income housing is provided in tenements or *colonias*. As the city has expanded outwards onto previously agricultural land, so its boundary has gradually extended to encompass formerly separate municipalities such as Banderilla to the northeast (see Figure 4.5).

Figure 4.5: Urban growth of Xalapa, 1960-1993



Source: adapted from Dredge 1995: 322

The history of *colonias populares* in Xalapa is linked to the activities of urban social movements there. Xalapa's rapid growth in the 1960s and 1970s led to the emergence of movements around *colonias populares*. In Xalapa (as in many other cities in Mexico) these neighbourhoods' historic tradition of self-organisation relates to their links with the Urban Popular Movement (MUP), which influenced local urban social movements nationwide. At the end of the 1960s, students from Xalapa were involved in social movements' country-wide demonstrations against the PRI's authoritarian rule. During the 1980s, settlers' movements formed on the city's peripheries, linked to a growing leftist political activism in existing *colonias*, alongside other movements protesting against the lack of state intervention in the problems of urban growth, and human rights violations. However, most of these movements were fairly ephemeral with modest achievements, partly due to their single-issue nature, but also to the state's capacity for co-optation (Quiñonez Leon 1997).

Of the 1980s social movements in Xalapa, the most prominent has been the Veracruz Tenants' and Housing Petitioners' Union (UCISV-Ver), which has been particularly successful in the low-income housing sector. Formed in the 1980s by two sociology professors from the *Universidad Veracruzana*, the movement had its basis in a census of informal housing carried out by humanities students in collaboration with low-income tenants (Vicente González 20.07.06²⁷). The very poor conditions in which tenants were living, combined with local authorities' unwillingness or inability to provide affordable land or housing, resulted in planned land invasions as a solution to housing need. In 1988, organised land invasions in Xalapa led to the establishment of *colonias populares* such as Revolución, UCISV-Ver (named after the organisation) and Dolores Hidalgo on the city periphery.

Urban government and spatial policies

For many years in Xalapa as elsewhere in Mexico, *colonias populares* were subject to a policy of benign neglect in place of a low-income public housing programme, forming part of a political strategy of mediation and control, organised along clientelist lines (Meyers 2003). As part of the government response to urban expansion, a planning process was introduced, replacing past strategies of regulating land usage through control of zoning building permits, regularisation of land tenure and selective investments in infrastructure and services (Meyers 2003). However, the politicised nature of the low-income housing sector in Mexico means that such programmes often continue to be based on patron-client structures relating to the prevailing political elite. From 2004 to 2007, Xalapa's Municipal Government was under the stewardship of Mayor Ricardo Ahued of the PRI, indicative of the region's longstanding status as a PRI stronghold. As the State capital, Xalapa is the site of political activity by local but also regional-level politicians, such as the State Governor Fidel Herrera Beltran, an inveterate politician with designs on the Federal Presidency. At the time of the research, campaigning had already begun for the Municipal and State elections due to take place at the end of 2007, with a corresponding increase in political activity.

²⁷ Interviews where the respondent is designated by his or her full name denote 'specialist interviews', as described in Chapter Five; for a full list, see Appendix Two.

The introduction of planning mechanisms in response to the city's rapid expansion saw the first Municipal Plan published in 1982, alongside legislation aimed at regulating the informal land market (discussed in more detail in Chapter Seven). Additional to these measures, in the 1990s the State Governor of Veracruz created a territorial reserve, acquiring *ejidal* land on the southeastern edge of Xalapa and distributing it among political organisations involved in the urban social movement, administered by the State Heritage Department (*Patrimonio del Estado*). Groups received as few as 20 or as many 350 plots of land, depending on their size and number of followers (Quiñonez Leon 1997). It has been argued the creation of a land reserve illustrated the overall pattern of class forces and interests in urban planning in Xalapa (Meyers 2003). According to this view, it is framed by World Bank policy, but determined by the interaction of local class and international market forces, manifested in pressure from below (in the form of social movements) and elite landholding interests, which are in turn influenced by wider economic forces such as fluctuations in commodity markets.

Urban planning, then, is still relatively new in Xalapa, and the Municipal Office of Urban Development (DGDU), which has responsibility for municipal planning, is under-resourced (Wanda Santos 18.07.06). The Office of Urban Development's main workload involves administering requests for change of land use, and providing technical support for CORETT on the feasibility of regularisation. The Municipal Development Plan, produced by the Office of Urban Development, determines which land is viable for regularisation or development. Around 95 per cent of informal development in the municipality is on *ejidal* land, with the remaining five per cent on private land (Wanda Santos 18.07.06). In the context of economic crises and a shrinking state sector, cuts in federal subsidies to the municipality have meant that regularisation of informal settlements has become a critical policy for the municipal government, based on the incorporation of residents into the city's tax base (Meyers 2003). At the local level, the Municipal Government sets official criteria for subdivision, usually relating to plot size, dedicated areas for facilities, and service provision.

The policy of regularisation in Xalapa has not resolved high demand for low-income housing. Although the State Government allegedly has plans to use its territorial reserves to provide new, fully-serviced housing under the *Vivienda Digna* programme, it has been suggested that Xalapa is suffering an urban housing crisis (AVC Noticias 2007). Informal development in Xalapa has tended to occur along communication corridors (Rodríguez 1990). With new infrastructure works, such as a bypass (*libramiento*) and major road extension (*El Perinorte*) planned on the northern side of the city, further development of *colonias* is likely. Indeed, the Municipal Office of Public Works plays an important role in urban expansion, due to its provision of infrastructure to *colonias populares*, as well as undertaking housing improvement programmes.

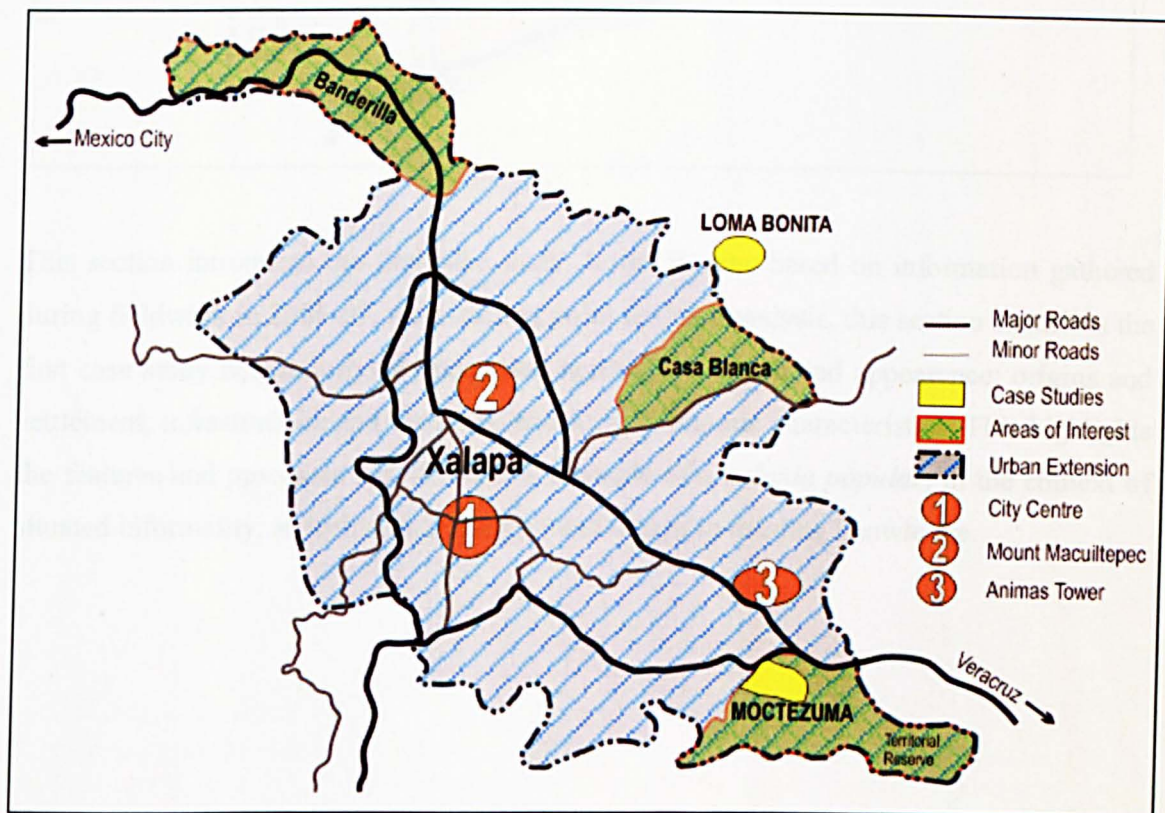
Resident participation in service provision also plays an increasingly important role in low-income housing policy, framed by discourses of democratisation. Presented as a responsibility for urban residents, 'participation' at the municipal level has become a priority in the context of decentralisation and neoliberal reforms. Service provision's link to the rhetoric of democratisation is based on its relation with the activities of urban social movements in the 1980s, resulting in forms of official participation through public works improvements in a process simulating participatory budgeting (Guarneros-Meza 2009). While this is meant to involve all urban residents, participation is often by residents of specific areas whose aims centre on improving quality of life there, meaning that projects have 'no impact on the holistic development of the cities', but aim to solve immediate local problems experienced by low-income residents (Guarneros-Meza 2009: 474).

In Xalapa, participation in urban development occurs through the Municipal Office for Citizen Participation, which effectively acts as a gatekeeper for requests for public works improvements from residents in low-income areas. In accordance with decentralisation, the creation of the *Ramo 33* (Branch 33) funding stream in 1997 meant that most of the poverty-alleviation funds formerly controlled by federal government were allocated to state and municipal levels. In Xalapa, this funding, which is ringfenced for use in addressing poverty, represents the primary source of official funding for infrastructure provision and

public works in *colonias populares*. These issues are further discussed in Chapter Seven's examination of citizen participation policy in Xalapa.

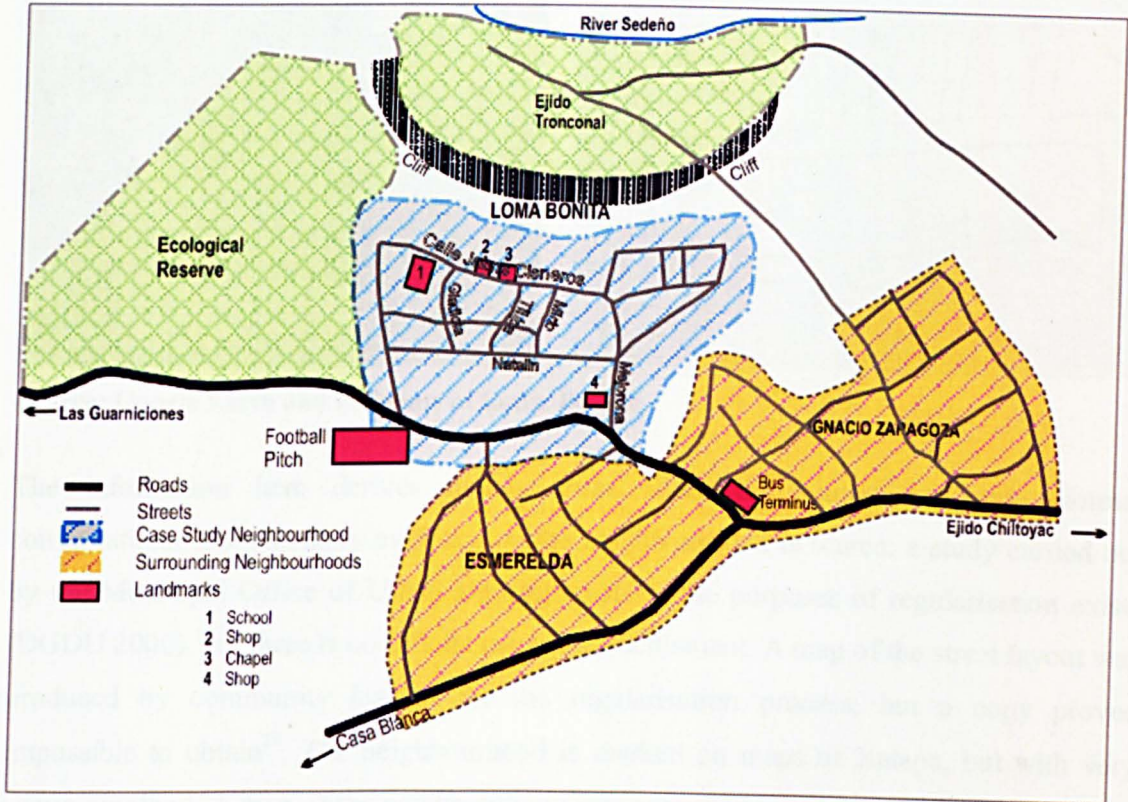
Xalapa's role as the administrative, cultural and commercial centre of Veracruz has contributed to its rapid unplanned expansion in recent decades, in the context of wider processes such as economic reforms and commodity market fluctuations, as outlined in this section. Large-scale informal development, in the form of *colonias populares*, has led to spatial policies such as planning and regularisation, but is also subject to the influence of powerful local interests. Meanwhile, high levels of housing demand persist, although existing neighbourhoods are formally encouraged to participate in service provision. In this setting, two case study *colonias populares* were identified: Colonia Loma Bonita and Colonia Moctezuma (see Figure 4.6), introduced in the next two sections of this chapter.

Figure 4.6: Map of Xalapa showing location of case studies



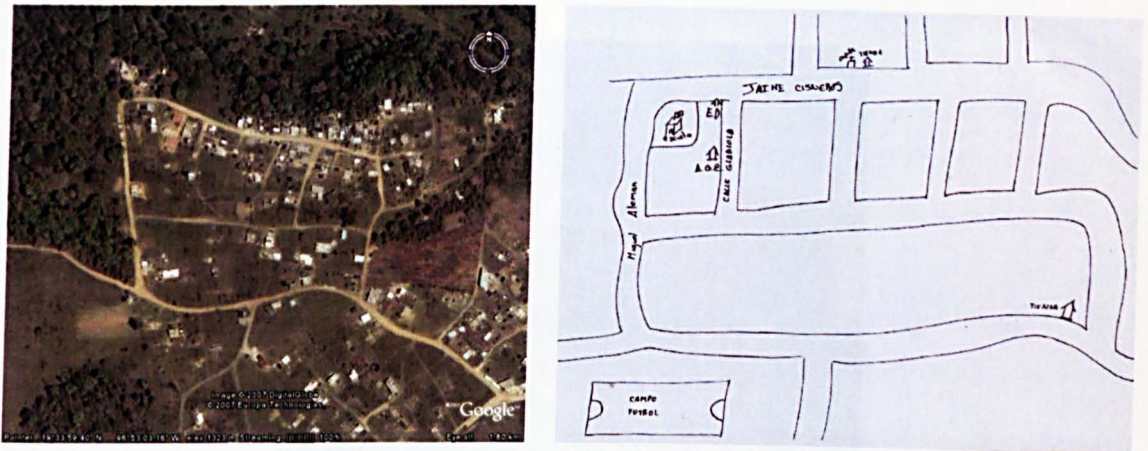
4.3 Case Study I: Colonia Loma Bonita

Figure 4.7: Map of Loma Bonita and surrounding area



This section introduces the first case study, Loma Bonita, based on information gathered during fieldwork in 2006-07. As a starting point for later analysis, this section examines the first case study neighbourhood under four headings: location and appearance; origins and settlement; infrastructure and facilities; and socio-economic characteristics. This highlights the features and processes specific to this example of a *colonia popular*, in the context of situated informality, as well as exposing potential gaps in existing knowledge.

Figure 4.8: Aerial view of Loma Bonita and hand-drawn map by resident



Source: Google Earth and residents of Loma Bonita

The information here derives mainly from observation, interviews and informal conversations. Documentary evidence on the neighbourhood is scarce: a study carried out by the Municipal Office of Urban Development for the purposes of regularisation exists (DGDU 2006), but there is no official map of the settlement. A map of the street layout was produced by community leaders for the regularisation process, but a copy proved impossible to obtain²⁸. The neighbourhood is marked on maps of Xalapa, but with very vague topology. A map of the neighbourhood was compiled based on information gathered (Figure 4.7). During the research, I asked a young respondent to draw a map, seen here alongside an aerial photograph (Figure 4.8).

²⁸ The difficulty of obtaining a copy of this map seemed to derive partly from the small number of copies in existence, and partly from the somewhat secretive nature of the Casa Blanca Democratic Association, a ‘civil society’ organisation based in the area, which was assisting residents with their regularisation petition.

Location and appearance

Photo 4.6: Entering Loma Bonita from the lower road (Melanie Lombard)



Typical of many *colonias populares*, Colonia Loma Bonita was founded on *ejidal* land. The *colonia* is a small settlement, established in 1998, which now houses around 35 families (see Photo 4.6). It is located on the northeastern outskirts of Xalapa, an hour by bus from the city centre. Its peripheral location was emphasised as tranquil and pleasant by many residents; however, land there is cheap precisely because of its unurbanised nature, which means that infrastructure is lacking. It appears to have low housing density, because of the sparse housing and empty lots (see Photo 4.7), but many families live in overcrowded conditions, indicative of the low levels of income.

Photo 4.7: Panorama of Loma Bonita from lower road (Melanie Lombard)



At first sight, Loma Bonita appears more rural than urban, populated by small, well-spaced dwellings dotted around a circuit of roughly-traced roads. In terms of land titles, it is legally still part of the Ejido Chiltoyac (as seen in Photo 4.3), the *ejido* to which the land originally

belonged²⁹. Remnants of its former agricultural use are still apparent, with coffee and banana plants in abundance. However, most current residents have obtained ‘use rights’³⁰. The neighbourhood is in process of regularisation, and is registered with the Municipality of Xalapa. Its current status might best be described as peri-urban, as a peripheral part of the city which is in transition (Aguilar 2008). The *colonia* is one of three developed from the same parcel of *ejidal* land, bordered to the east by Colonia Ignacio Zaragoza, to the north by a cliff underneath which is situated Ejido El Tronconal, to the west by an ecological reserve, and to the south by the new Colonia Esmeralda and the access road from Xalapa (the *Antiguo Camino a Chiltoyac*). Although the neighbourhood is on a slight incline (see Photo 4.8), its relatively flat topography is considered appropriate for habitation (DGDU 2006).

Photo 4.8: Loma Bonita from the lower road (Melanie Lombard)



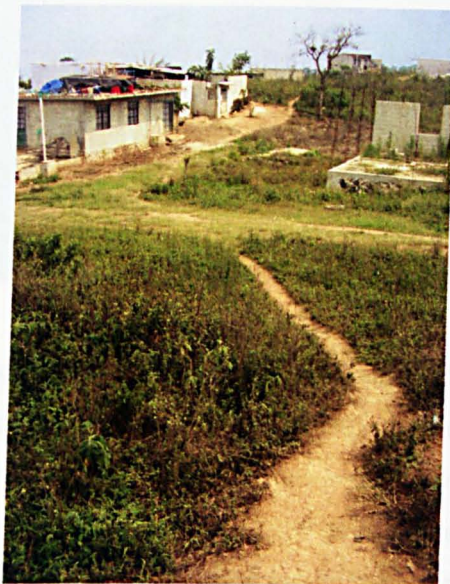
Loma Bonita has 14 thoroughfares, of which the main street is Calle Jaime Cisneros Gonzalez (eight metres wide), with eight secondary streets (six metres wide) and five avenues (four metres wide) (DGDU 2006). In actual fact, the ‘streets’ are often little more than rough paths cut through the scrubland (see Photo 4.9), and even the larger roads are

²⁹ This is reflected in its full name, ‘Loma Bonita de Chiltoyac’, which also distinguishes it from another neighbourhood called ‘Loma Bonita’ in Xalapa; the name (‘pretty slope’ in English) is quite common.

³⁰ On the basis of a semi-legal transaction in which the buyer pays for papers which cede use rights of the land to them (*cesión de derechos*); however, these are not legally recognised, as the title papers (*escritura*) and ownership rights remain with the *ejidatario* until regularisation.

unpaved. The Municipality reports that the neighbourhood consists of 11 blocks (*manzanas*), with a total of 119 lots whose surface areas vary from 105 square metres to 536 square metres (DGDU 2006).

Photo 4.9: 'Street' in Loma Bonita (Melanie Lombard)



Most houses are fairly small, with only one floor, and built with mixed materials, including wood, breezeblock, tin, cardboard, concrete and glass (see Photo 4.10). About half have concrete internal floors, while the rest have dirt floors (see Photo 4.11). Internally, structures vary: smaller houses may have just one main room, containing areas for cooking, eating and sleeping. Larger houses have separate bedrooms, often shared by several family members. Most houses have an outside area in the front or back, which is used for a variety of purposes including storing water, bathing and washing, and cooking (usually with a wood fire).

Photo 4.10: Typical housing in Loma Bonita (Melanie Lombard)



The level of occupation in the neighbourhood has been calculated at 65 per cent in terms of the total occupied land surface (DGDU 2006). In fact, it is probably much lower, as there are many unoccupied lots, often with buildings in *obra negra*³¹, which serve to demonstrate ownership of the land so that it is not invaded or expropriated (as seen in Photo 4.8). On a basis of 40 families occupying a total of 119 plots, habitation (in terms of families per plot) would be closer to 35 per cent. It is possible that the Office of Urban Development's over-estimation derives from a calculation on the basis of dwellings rather than actual inhabitants, which may have been in order to expedite regularisation, for political or economic reasons. This apparently contradictory situation, of high levels of ownership combined with low occupation, indicates the existence of speculation in the *colonia*, showing its connectedness to wider land markets in Xalapa.

³¹ Structures under construction, normally comprising foundations, walls and a roof, but unfit for habitation.

Photo 4.11: Interior in Loma Bonita (Melanie Lombard)



Origins and settlement

The neighbourhood's origins demonstrate the complex and potentially conflictive circumstances which surround development on *ejidal* land. The following account of the neighbourhood's origins is from an interview with local community leader Don³² Benedicto (Benedicto 27.03.07), except where otherwise indicated³³. The original landowner, an *ejidatario* from the Ejido Chiltoyac called Crecencio Villa Trujillo, sold the parcel of agricultural land to an intermediary or 'coyote', Agustín Barranco Sanchez, in 1998. He marked out a rough system of plots without any regard for the Municipal Government's official criteria for subdivision. He then sold lots through public meetings in a nearby neighbourhood, Las Higueras (Camelia 16.03.07). In such a process, residents usually buy and settle in groups, although transactions are with individuals. In this case, Agustín fraudulently sold some plots to more than one group.

³² In Mexican Spanish, 'Don' is used as a respectful form of addressing older people and figures in authority.

³³ Interviews where the interviewee is denoted by a single name indicate semi-structured interviews, as described in Chapter Five; for a full list, see Appendix One. All names of respondents are pseudonyms, and all translations from interviews are by the author.

The first settlers were a group of six related families originally from Martínez de la Torre, a small municipality (population 97,968) north of Xalapa in the central zone of Veracruz State (shown on Figure 4.2). Led by Don Carlos, they arrived and started building in 1998 (Camelia 16.03.07; Leon 22.03.07), mostly around the upper area of the neighbourhood and the main street (see Photo 4.12). They encountered land that was still covered in sugar cane crops, meaning they had to clear and demarcate their own plots, and mark out and clear streets (Camelia 16.03.07). They also initiated the process of requesting services. In 2000, they managed to set up the existing water system and level the main streets, followed by the construction of a primary school later in the same year.

Photo 4.12: Main street (Calle Jaime Cisneros) facing east (Melanie Lombard)



Meanwhile, conflict arose as the fraudulent land sale came to light when more settlers arrived to take possession of their land, resulting in the same plots being contested by several claimants. This situation reached crisis point in 2000 when a second group of settlers, headed by a leader called Alberto, arrived to take possession of plots that were already settled by the first residents, and threatened them with violence, brandishing machetes. The situation was calmed by the intervention of community leaders from the Casa Blanca Democratic Association, who mediated between the two groups' claims. Although a violent outcome was avoided, the issue arose again in 2007, when accusations relating to the fraudulent land sale led to the arrest and imprisonment of several people

allegedly involved with the intermediary Agustín (who had long since disappeared): Crecencio Villa Trujillo (the original *ejidatario* owner), his mother, and Don Carlos, the local leader. All were subsequently freed when it was discovered that their accusers had forged signatures on documentation offered as evidence, although not until after Don Carlos had spent several months in prison. This episode is further discussed in Chapter Seven.

More recent arrivals have bought land from Don Severino, a community leader in the adjacent neighbourhood Ignacio Zaragoza; or through regular land sale meetings, which are still held in nearby areas, organised by the current community leaders (raising questions about their exact involvement in land transactions). The neighbourhood's status, lacking formal titles and services while awaiting regularisation, may account for the low levels of occupation compared to ownership (Isaac and Eliza 20.05.07). People who have bought plots may be awaiting regularisation before building and moving to the neighbourhood, as regularisation is perceived to precede the arrival of services. While the sale of plots on this basis is a positive indicator (as it suggests that regularisation is perceived as imminent), the process of regularisation is contingent on a certain level of occupation density, which can create a vicious circle of stagnation for under-populated areas with poor services. This again suggests that *colonia* development is related to land markets and economic conditions in the wider city, rather than happening in an isolated way.

Photo 4.13: Children outside their house in Loma Bonita (Melanie Lombard)



Respondents estimated the level of occupation at the time of the research as between 35 and 40 households (Leon 22.03.07; Joaquin 26.02.07), equating to 100 residents in total (Benedicto 27.03.07), with an average of 2.6 people per household. However, observation suggests this average is misleading, as families tended to be quite large or relatively small, ranging from Pedro's two-person family (as a single parent of one son) to Don Carlo's family of eight-plus (two parents and six children plus several grandchildren). Many households in the neighbourhood are related in some way, due to family connections between the original settlers (Alicia 26.03.07). The sense of extended family can be seen in the way that children move quite freely between houses, meaning notions of public and private space are fairly fluid, an issue which is further discussed in Chapter Eight's analysis of place meaning.

Photo 4.14: Young people in Loma Bonita (Melanie Lombard)



Households are also characterised by shifting numbers, due to young adults working away from home in seasonal jobs. Observation indicated that more women than men lived there; but this may be due to the research being carried out in the day, when more women were in the neighbourhood. The relatively young population includes a large number of children,

and some teenagers (see Photos 4.13 and 4.14). Often, heads of families are in their early twenties, and there are fewer middle-aged people in the neighbourhood, but some elderly people (60 years and over) in evidence.

Infrastructure and facilities

The neighbourhood has the most basic informal services, but suffers from inadequate infrastructure. At the time of the research, it was supplied by a water system constructed by the residents. In 2000, they bought a water tank between them, and connected this to a water inlet two kilometres down the access road at El Sumidero, using tubing donated from the Municipal Water and Drainage Commission (CMAS), authorised by the Municipality (Benedicto 27.03.07) (see Photo 4.15). The quality and supply is variable, and there are some months when water is not available, meaning residents have to use water from a local spring, although this is too polluted to drink. Poorer residents make do with this as their sole source of water, if they can't afford the monthly water payments that each household makes to a local shopkeeper, who receives the bill and divides it up. There is also a daily rota for walking the length of the tube and checking it for leaks (Isaac and Eliza 20.05.07).

Photo 4.15: Pipes on access road/entering Loma Bonita (Mauro Castro/Melanie Lombard)



There is no electricity supply in the neighbourhood, meaning there is no public lighting or telephone service. Some households use batteries for televisions, stereos, and lighting. During the research, residents were awaiting a response from the Veracruz Institute for the Promotion of Regional Development (IDERE) to their petition for connection to the existing electricity supply of nearby neighbourhood Las Guarniciones, on the other side of the ecological reserve. There is no drainage or sanitation service, and many residents use septic pits.

Photo 4.16: Different forms of transport on Loma Bonita access road (Melanie Lombard)



Most of the streets were unpaved at the time of the research, and the access road, the Antiguo Camino a Chiltoyac, was unsurfaced from about two kilometres before Loma Bonita (see Photo 4.16). The main street, Calle Jaime Cisneros, was levelled and given a temporary covering by residents using local authority machinery when they first arrived, but it has not been maintained and is in poor condition. Since then, residents have been promised proper road surfacing in response to their repeated petitions, but without results (Leon 22.03.07). This situation affects access to and around the neighbourhood. At the time of the research, there was no refuse collection service, and most residents burned their rubbish, or dumped it outside the neighbourhood (Leon 22.03.07). Residents had petitioned for a regular collection service, but again, although officials had made promises, it had not

been implemented. An irregular private refuse collection service charging 10 pesos³⁴ per small bag was in operation, but was too expensive for many residents.

The provision of these basic services was based on the self-organised efforts of the residents, highlighted as the main means of service provision in *colonias populares* in previous sections. In the case of Loma Bonita, residents' efforts have met with varying degrees of success. The lack of necessary infrastructure such as road surfacing and electricity has hindered the provision of secondary services such as telephone and transport in the neighbourhood. Many residents have mobiles, although to charge them they have to go outside the neighbourhood, to friends, family or work; one respondent explained that he had two mobile phones, so as to always have one functioning for emergencies (Leon 22.03.07). There was no internet access in the neighbourhood, and most residents didn't seem to use email, with the exception of a few young people.

Photo 4.17: Bus terminal in Ignacio Zaragoza (Melanie Lombard)



The sole bus route serving the neighbourhood (*Ruta 8 Torres*) takes over an hour from the city centre to the terminal in Ignacio Zaragoza, a five- to ten-minute walk from the main street in Loma Bonita (see Photo 4.17). The residents of Loma Bonita had requested this service from the State Department of Transport, and in 2005, a service going as far as the

³⁴ About 50 pence at the time of the research.

main street there was installed. However, after an accident in which a child was killed in 2006, the terminal was moved to Ignacio Zaragoza (Leon 22.03.07). If it rains, the bus service stops at El Sumidero, two kilometres down the road, meaning residents have to walk at least that far and sometimes further. Taxis rarely enter looking for business, and sometimes refuse to go as far as the neighbourhood (something which I experienced during my research). Few families own cars, and the only other observable means of transport were horses or animals, normally used for goods (as seen in Photo 4.16). The nearest private health service for residents was in *Farmacias Plus* in Avenida Chedraui, 20 minutes away by bus, but those who could not afford to pay had to travel to a free charitable service in the city centre.

Photo 4.18: School building in Loma Bonita (Melanie Lombard)



At the time of the research, there was no primary or secondary school in Loma Bonita, but the school building, originally constructed in 2000 in collaboration with the Municipal Government, was being used as a kindergarten. A primary school was operating in Ignacio Zaragoza, but conflict over this meant that many residents from Loma Bonita chose to send their children to school further away in El Sumidero. This issue is discussed in more detail in Chapter Eight's analysis of residents' place-making. For recreation, the neighbourhood has a football pitch at its far corner, where it borders with Esmerelda and the ecological reserve, which residents cleared (Isaac and Eliza 20.05.07). The neighbourhood additionally has one green area (measuring 1,270 square metres) (DGDU 2006), unusable

at the time of the research due to being overgrown. The River Sedeño is about 20 minutes away from the neighbourhood, under the cliff towards the Ejido Tronconal. People used to go swimming there, but it is now too polluted (see Photo 4.19). There is also a dedicated area for community facilities, such as a school or clinic, which has yet to be developed (864 square metres), and requires clearing before it can be used (DGDU 2006).

Photo 4.19: Polluted River Sedeño (Melanie Lombard)



Socio-economic characteristics

Among adults of working age, the main income generator seems to be paid agricultural work, such as clearing land and harvesting crops. This is often seasonal, regional work, meaning that workers are away from home for long periods of time: for example, Don Carlos's daughters were away for several months harvesting grapes and asparagus in Sonora, in the far north of Mexico. Competition for scarce jobs, piecework and low levels of pay mean seasonal workers are vulnerable to unstable incomes; although the sense of adventure involved in this work seems to be an added incentive for some young adults. In a similar vein, several residents mentioned relatives who had migrated 'to the other side' (*al otro lado*) of the United States border, seeking work there. Some residents had paid

employment in the city centre, as shop assistants, cleaners or vendors. Several households kept animals such as pigs, chickens and ducks as a source of subsistence and income: most Saturdays, a household would kill a pig, to sell the meat and use some for a family meal, sometimes to mark a particular occasion. Some residents used empty land for subsistence crops such as maize and beans.

Photo 4.20: Construction business in Esmerelda (Melanie Lombard)



In general, incomes appeared to be low, evidenced by housing materials, and other living conditions. For example, Don Carlos's family couldn't afford to buy cornmeal to make *tamales*³⁵ for the Day of the Dead, which would normally be celebrated with a family meal. Some of the poorest families in the neighbourhood receive assistance from the federal welfare programme *Oportunidades*, in the form of subsidised provisions and other necessities. Residents had also received charitable assistance from the religious initiative *Caritas*, and from local churches (Macarena 14.03.07). The two small shops in the neighbourhood were owned by residents, but there were few other local businesses in evidence. The *tortilla* man passed through on a moped daily, from a *tortillería* in one of the nearest adjacent neighbourhoods. In the adjoining neighbourhood, Esmerelda, there was a construction material company (see Photo 4.20). One of the residents mentioned that she used to cut hair for children in the neighbourhood free of charge, but there appeared to be little more in the way of services.

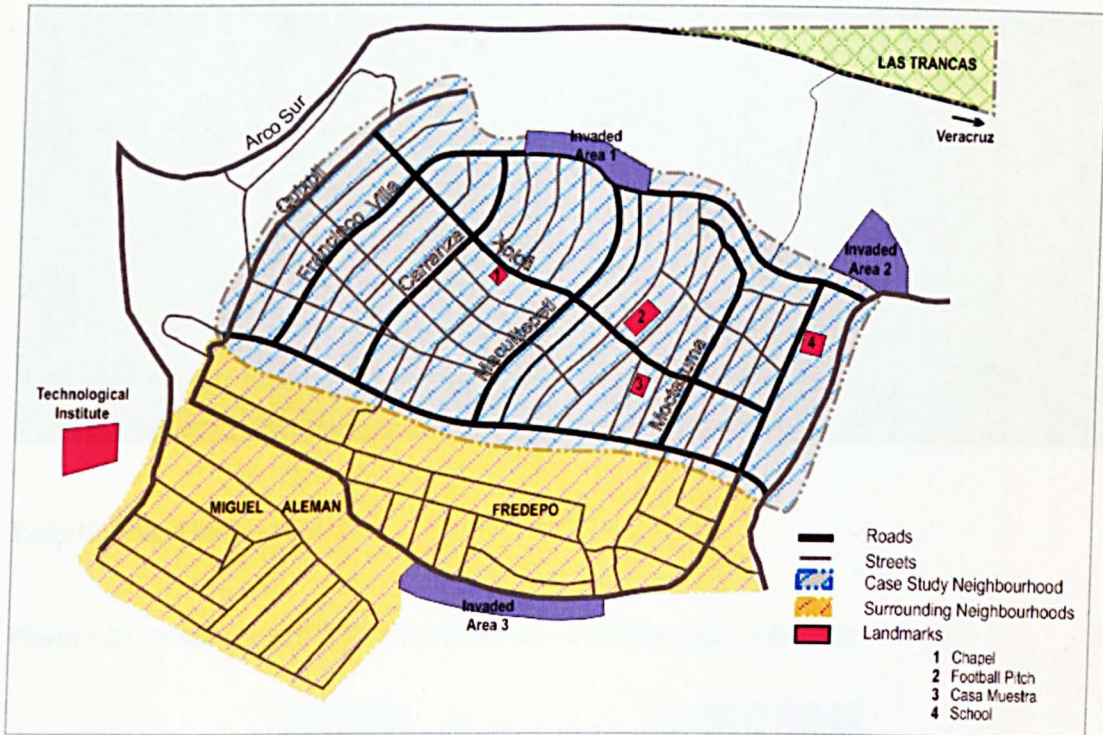
³⁵ Corn or banana leaves stuffed with cornmeal and other fillings such as meat, cheese or chile.

As outlined in this section, Loma Bonita seems in many ways to be a 'typical' *colonia popular*. It was developed on *ejidal* land, meaning it has relatively insecure tenure, by residents who are in their majority poor. Its peripheral nature and lack of services reflect the low cost of land in the area, which in turn affects the neighbourhood's socio-economic complexion. On the other hand, evidence of speculation indicates connectedness to the rest of the city, as well as ownership of land by wealthier people. Its low levels of consolidation may be due to existing residents' lack of resources. However, there appear to be social and political issues relating to self-organisation, leadership, and conflict within the neighbourhood (as well as with other neighbouring *colonias*). Additional to this, the settlement's history of land sale is indicative of particular power relations there. While a superficial examination of Loma Bonita confirms that it exhibits some 'typical' features of urban informal settlements, questions are raised about the specific social, political and cultural processes that connect it to the wider city. These may relate to some of its more complex and contradictory characteristics, less easily explained by simplistic theories of informality, an issue which is returned to in later analytical chapters. The next section turns to the second case study neighbourhood.

4.4 Case Study II: Colonia Moctezuma

This section introduces the second case study neighbourhood, Moctezuma. Again, the discussion focuses on four aspects: location and appearance; origins and settlement; infrastructure and facilities; and socio-economic characteristics.. In this way, existing knowledge and potential gaps in this are highlighted. There is more official documentation available on Moctezuma than Loma Bonita, partly due to its longer existence, as well as its origins and the involvement of political and social organisations in the neighbourhood.

Figure 4.9: Map of Moctezuma and surrounding area



The main sources of information were a report from the *Programa Habitat*³⁶ carried out in Moctezuma by the Office of Public Works, as part of a process of self-diagnosis by the residents (DGOP 2005), and a report written by a French researcher in collaboration with the organisation UCISV-Ver (Turpin 2006). All other information came from interviews and observation. A map was compiled for the purposes of the research, based on the information gathered (Figure 4.9), complementing residents' own representation of the neighbourhood, seen in Figure 4.10 alongside an aerial photograph.

³⁶ A federal programme administered at local level by various departments, which involves resident participation in identifying and resolving the problems in a particular neighbourhood.

Figure 4.10: Aerial view of Moctezuma and collective map drawn by residents in focus group



Location and appearance

Photo 4.21: Main street (Calle Xolotl) facing south (Melanie Lombard)



Colonia Moctezuma is a relatively established neighbourhood. It is unusual in that it was developed on land belonging to the State Government, meaning that most residents have legal tenure of their plots. However, the neighbourhood developed through processes normally associated with informal settlements. Moctezuma is located in the southeast of Xalapa, about 30 minutes from the city centre by bus. It is a relatively large settlement, with a population of between 3,000 and 5,000 (according to different estimates). It has a discernible street layout and fairly dense habitation. Moctezuma is considered to be well-

located: there are several higher education institutions nearby (the Xalapa Technological Institute, Anahuac University, Veracruz University), and the surrounding area is currently undergoing intensive development, with a new commercial centre and government office buildings recently completed.

Photo 4.22: Moctezuma from neighbouring *colonia* Fredepo (Melanie Lombard)



The neighbourhood's relative density and level of development lend it a consolidated appearance, along with the abundance of shops and services along the main street, Calle Xolotl (see Photos 4.21, 4.22 and 4.23). During the afternoons and evenings there is life in the streets: children playing, cars passing, people chatting on street corners. But many houses are still under construction; there are uninhabited plots on almost every block; and the lack of greenery and paving makes it arid in the heat, and muddy when it rains. According to residents, Moctezuma as it is now is the result of years of struggle, which are not yet over: for example, not all houses are connected to the sewerage network.

Photo 4.23: Looking towards Colonia Fredepo from Moctezuma (Melanie Lombard)



The neighbourhood is bordered to the north by the main road Arco Sur, linking the centre of Xalapa to the motorway to Veracruz, via Las Trancas; and to the south, it is bordered by Colonias Fredepo and Miguel Aleman. To the east is a main road leading to Las Trancas (DGOP 2005: 18), a market area on the outskirts of Xalapa. To the west, there is a main road which leads to the Xalapa Technological Institute. However, its precise boundaries are uncertain, and vary according to different sources (Focus Group 23.05.07³⁷). This may be the result of the neighbourhood's incremental development.

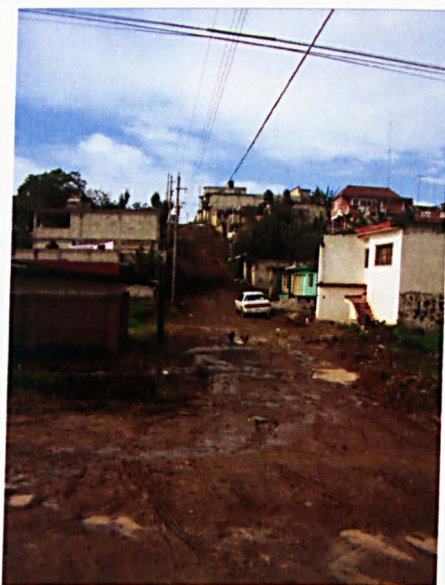
Photo 4.24: Different types of housing in Moctezuma (Melanie Lombard)



³⁷ This focus group, which is described in more detail in Chapter Five, is included in the list of visits and other events which took place during the research, in Appendix Three.

Housing quality and size vary greatly, but the predominant building materials are breezeblock, cement and brick (see Photo 4.24). Many houses have two or more floors, and are painted on the outside; but there is also a noticeable proportion of smaller dwellings, made of materials such as tin and wood, particularly in the newer, peripheral squatted areas. Most of the housing seems to be owner-occupied, but there is a growing rental market, especially for students at nearby educational establishments (Magdalena 14.02.07). The steep, inconsistent topography has meant that settlers encountered increased difficulty and expense in dwelling construction and service installation. The topography is a causal factor in flood risk, which has augmented on the basis of the State Government's decision to change the status of high flood-risk areas, originally designated as green spaces, to residential use (in order to maximise density), causing erosion (see Photo 4.25).

Photo 4.25: Street after rain, Moctezuma (Melanie Lombard)



Origins and settlement

The origins of the neighbourhood are atypical in that the residents do not suffer from insecure tenure, but many of the development processes are in line with the 'consolidation'

that *colonias* are perceived to undergo. According to some accounts, Moctezuma was first settled in 1990, as an invasion of agricultural land on the outskirts of Xalapa by a group of displaced people led by Don Baltazar Hernandez, the victims of a fraudulent land transaction elsewhere in the city (DGOP 2005). Initially, Moctezuma consisted of six blocks traced out over rough terrain, separated from what was then the neighbourhood of Santa Barbara by a strip of land, with only one entrance (DGOP 2005). Following pressure on the Municipal Government by these settlers, the land was formally acquired by the Veracruz State Government in the early 1990s. Moctezuma was formally established in 1993, as part of the Xalapa land reserve (the *Reserva Territorial Xalapa*) created by the Veracruz State Government (DGOP 2005). As mentioned in previous sections, plots for residential use were granted by the State Heritage Department (*Patrimonio del Estado*) to various political groups involved in the urban social movement, such as MOPI³⁸ and the PRD, with allocations supposedly based on housing need and number of members. However, this meant that much of the land was distributed on a clientelistic basis. The remaining plots were granted on the basis of individuals' applications to the State Heritage Department.

When it was first settled in 1990, the land was uncleared and covered with greenery such as orange, lime, fig, and coffee plants, meaning the first settlers had to clear the land and cut paths through the undergrowth (DGOP 2005). When the State Government acquired the land, it cleared the remainder in order to mark out streets and lots, until there was almost no vegetation (Turpin 2006: 24). Despite promises that land would be granted as serviced lots, it was delivered as unserviced terrain, lacking basic infrastructure. Residents had to construct their own dwellings and obtain basic services, most of which are now installed. The surrounding area was undeveloped, and not served by public transport. Initial constructions were rudimentary, made out of cardboard and plastic to shelter settlers' possessions. Water came from a nearby spring and wells, or residents collected rainwater in drums, risking dengue fever. The Municipality also sent a free tanker service which allocated 200 litres per household per week; however, this was often insufficient. Firewood was used for cooking and heating, and coyotes roamed the area. For light, people used

³⁸ The Workers' Independent Movement, a political group involved in Xalapa's urban social movement.

candles and oil lamps, and for electric power, they used batteries (DGOP 2005: 14). Gas was bought from *Gas de Xalapa*, located outside Moctezuma on the main avenue into the city centre (Lazaro Cardenas) where *Sam's Club* mall now is (DGOP 2005). Once services were introduced, the neighbourhood became more populous.

Photo 4.26: Houses in invaded area of Moctezuma (Melanie Lombard)



Because of the neighbourhood's 'formal' origins, most residents have legal titles to their land, although these were not fully regularised until 1996, when the land was formally granted by deed as the property of the State Government (Turpin 2006: 21). Once lots were delivered, residents had three months to begin construction: failure to do so in this time was supposed to result in the withdrawal of the land titles, apparently to safeguard against speculation (although in practice, withdrawal of titles appears to have happened infrequently). The exceptions to the situation with tenure are the peripheral areas of invasion mentioned above. There are at least three of these in or around the neighbourhood (see Photo 4.26), including one on an area earmarked for a community health centre, near the exit to Las Trancas (see Figure 4.9). People first arrived here two years ago and constructed shelters of wood, cardboard, tin and plastic sheeting, where they have been living since then. This has caused conflict in the neighbourhood, as more established residents are aggrieved about the expropriation of 'community' land by a group of settlers.

It is believed that the group is headed by a political leader, Daniel Rendón, who has links to a political group *Frente Popular Francisco Villa*, similar to the PRI-sponsored activist group *Antorcha Campesino* (Alejandra 07.03.07). While there is little doubt that the settlers are in need of housing, suspicions that they have the tacit approval of the State and Municipal Governments to settle there are bolstered by the authorities' failure to evict them. This emphasises the politicised nature of informal settlement in Mexico, as well as revealing the diversity of types of tenure in the neighbourhood. While this is a source of conflict, it also points to heterogeneity within the neighbourhood on other grounds, such as time of residence, and level of income.

Infrastructure and facilities

Despite most residents having legal tenure, the initial unserviced nature of the land has required them to undertake processes of self-organisation commonly associated with *colonias populares*. At the time of the research, the neighbourhood had most basic services, but the long process to obtain these was mostly driven by residents. The introduction of basic services took place over the course of about three years, from 1997 to 2000 (DGOP 2005), meaning the first residents were without formal services for between four and seven years. Electricity was installed by Federal Electricity Commission (CFE) in May 1997, and the cost of installation was included in residents' electricity bills (Teresa and Aida 16.02.07). Piped water was installed in December 1997, following residents' petitions to the Municipal Government through the neighbourhood *patronato*³⁹. The process was prolonged due to authorities' reluctance to accept responsibility: the request was passed from the Municipal Government to the State Government, and then to the Veracruz State Water Commission (CAEV), who eventually installed the network. The residents paid 20 per cent of the installation cost up front, while the Municipal Government is responsible for administering and maintaining the network. Throughout the prolonged petitioning process, residents applied extra pressure to the Municipal Government with demonstrations, often supported by other factions of the urban social movement in Xalapa (Turpin 2006: 22).

³⁹ A form of residents' committee which works with local government through the Office of Citizen Participation. See Chapter Seven for a fuller discussion of the Citizen Participation framework in Xalapa.

Connection to the sewerage network was obtained in a similar manner, through petitions and protests. By 2000, a network had been installed, which residents paid for in two instalments (DGOP 2005: 14). However, it wasn't connected to the municipal system until 2002, again following pressure on the Municipal Government by the residents (Turpin 2006: 23). One respondent noted that the location of the waste outlet is still unclear, and there were suspicions of pollution (Alejandra 07.03.07). Furthermore, not all residents are connected to the sewerage network, as each household has to pay an additional connection cost for this, which some cannot afford. This also affects the construction of pavements and road surfacing, as this work cannot be completed in a given street until every resident there is connected to the drainage network, in order to avoid excavating finished surfaces.

Photo 4.27: Telephone exchange in Moctezuma (solicited photo, Teresa and Aida)



Secondary services have taken longer to install in Moctezuma. The telephone service was installed in the neighbourhood in 2004 (see Photo 4.27), and by 2005, more than 60 per cent of homes had a phone (DGOP 2005: 14). Many residents also have mobile phones. Around eight per cent of residents use cable communications, but few have internet or fax

installed at home (DGOP 2005: 20). However, the neighbourhood is well-served by internet cafes: at the time of the research there were at least four, although they tended to charge slightly more than in the city centre⁴⁰. Most streets in the neighbourhood are unsurfaced, although many have pavements. At the time of the research, the Municipal Government had just started work to pave the main street, coinciding with the campaigning period for Municipal elections (see Photo 4.28). Many respondents expressed hopes that this would indirectly improve other services, particularly public transport. At the time, only one bus service (*Rilmarbus*) went into the neighbourhood. It had served the neighbourhood since 2000, but according to respondents it was problematic: the owner had vetoed other services from entering the neighbourhood; service was poor, especially when it rained; buses were in bad condition; and there were long waits between buses, especially at lunchtime, when drivers wouldn't pick up passengers. Because of this, residents were petitioning for an improved service.

Photo 4.28: Start of works to pave the main street, Moctezuma (Melanie Lombard)



Rubbish collection was introduced in 1999, after a year of residents' petitions, as increasing numbers of people moved in to the neighbourhood. Prior to the collection service, people dumped refuse on empty lots or in the streets, or burned their rubbish (Turpin 2006: 25). However, even after it was implemented, the service was irregular until 2004. At the time of the research, refuse was collected twice a week, but not necessarily on fixed days.

⁴⁰ Eight pesos (40 pence at the time of the research) per hour as opposed to six (30 pence) in the centre.

Respondents expressed a preference for a daily service, as in the city centre (Magdalena 14.02.07); others were concerned that rubbish dumping was still a problem because of the poor quality of the service. During the research, some building waste and household refuse was in evidence in the streets.

Photo 4.29: Football pitch in main street, Moctezuma (Melanie Lombard)



At the time of the research, the neighbourhood had a doctor's service, which only opened during the day. Residents had submitted a petition for a health centre, which was seen as a priority (Turpin 2006: 23), especially give the health risks in the neighbourhood from open drainage channels (DGOP 2005: 16-7), and unpaved streets. In 1993 a primary school (*Francisco Villa*) was opened and in 2000/01, a kindergarten was formed, with another opened in 2005 (DGOP 2005: 15). There is a sports area between Calle Citlali and Avenida Xolotl (DGOP 2005: 20), and a football pitch (see Photo 4.29). There are also several green areas and children's playgrounds (see Photo 4.30), although not all are properly maintained (Teresa and Aida 16.02.07). A rudimentary community centre, built by UCISV-Ver as a 'show home' (*Casa Muestra*), is used for meetings and workshops relating to the organisation, although not by other groups or individuals. A neighbourhood security service (*vigilancia*) used to operate at a cost of five pesos per household, but this had ceased.

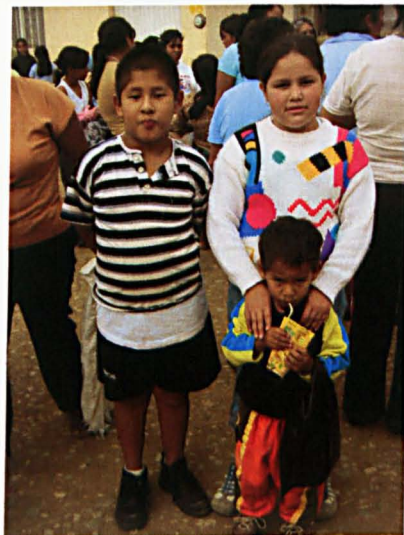
Photo 4.30: Children's play area, Moctezuma (solicited photo, Teresa and Aida)



Socio-economic characteristics

Moctezuma's high levels of occupation seem to be related to the relatively rapid arrival of services, which may have added to its attractiveness as a location. In 2000, Moctezuma's population was 2,806, according to the 2000 census (Turpin 2006: 41). During the research, a local leader estimated it to be closer to 5,000 (Federico 14.02.07). This discrepancy may be partly due to uncertainty about the neighbourhood's exact boundaries, or a rapidly increasing population.

Photo 4.31: Children in Moctezuma (Melanie Lombard)



The predominant household structure seems to be small families, with one or two parents and an average of two children (see Photo 4.31). There are slightly more women (51 per cent) than men (49 per cent) living in the neighbourhood (DGOP 2005: 24-5). The population is fairly young, with 49 per cent of women and 57 per cent of men aged under 23 (DGOP 2005). The proportion of ‘economically productive’ adults (aged between 24 and 64) is 44 per cent of women, and 39 per cent of men (DGOP 2005). In terms of occupation, women are most likely to be housewives (40 per cent), students (33 per cent) or employees (23 per cent) – mainly domestic, in shops or selling food – while men are mainly employees (54 per cent) and students (37 per cent) (DGOP 2005: 28-9). According to my research findings, many respondents were self-employed vendors, for example of home-made food or soft furnishings. Some households received contributions from other family members living outside the neighbourhood (seven per cent), of which 25 per cent were remittances (DGOP 2005: 30), indicating that Moctezuma has also experienced migration. Almost half the population (54 per cent) earn less than 2,000 pesos⁴¹ monthly (DGOP 2005: 31).

Photo 4.32: Shop in Moctezuma (Melanie Lombard)



⁴¹ Around £100 at the time of the research.

Diverse local businesses, including general stores (*misceláneas*, as seen in Photo 4.32), butchers', *tortillerías* and greengrocers, offer basic products (DGOP 2005: 21-2). There is also a small weekly market selling fresh produce (Gracia 14.02.07). However, these businesses' high prices mean that many residents go outside the neighbourhood to do their shopping. During the research, animals could often be observed in the street: domesticated ones such as dogs, but also hens and cows, normally tethered near their owners' homes (see Photo 4.33). There are also commercial services such as carpenters, electrical workshops, construction material suppliers and stylists, and there is a *cantina*⁴² in Calle Xolotl (DGOP 2005: 22).

Photo 4.33: Cockerel and chickens in Calle Popocatepetl (Melanie Lombard)



Many residents were still paying for land in instalments at the time of the research, indicating that credit was not generally available (Gracia 14.02.07). Several housing improvement schemes exist in the neighbourhood, most notably that of UCISV-Ver, which offers residents credit on the basis of a revolving savings fund (*tanda*) (Alejandra 07.03.07). One resident with a small dress-making business (see Photo 4.34) had obtained microcredits from the state (Olivia 05.02.07). Other forms of available credit were likely to be at very high interest rates, such as the instalment schemes offered by the white goods

⁴² *Cantinas* are bars of ill-repute, which normally have almost exclusively male clientele.

shop *Electra*, exploiting the situation of low-income customers who can only pay small amounts over a long period (Alejandra 07.03.07).

Photo 4.34: Ofelia's workshop, Moctezuma (Melanie Lombard)



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

4.5 Conclusion

This chapter has explored the research setting of Mexico and Xalapa, in order to contextualise and situate some of the issues discussed in previous chapters, and to explore contingent local factors at national, municipal and neighbourhood scales. The urban context in Mexico has been subject to the effects of neoliberalisation, democratisation, and decentralisation. These processes have interacted with other historical, social and cultural factors – particularly uneven development, rapid urbanisation, an inadequate formal housing system and the *ejidal* land market – to produce a situation in which *colonias populares* are the most common form of low-income housing. The legacies of a corporatist political culture have shaped how urban governments and spatial policies (such as regularisation) relate to *colonias populares* in ways which seem to perpetuate their marginalised position, while simultaneously offering them prospects for improvement.

In Xalapa, these processes, in conjunction with specific local factors, have affected the spatial and social development of the city. Its role as capital of Veracruz, and the effects of economic reforms in the surrounding agricultural region, have led to large-scale unplanned growth and development of *colonias populares*, perceived as part of the city's 'crisis'. The authorities' responses seem to have been based more on manipulation than repression, influenced by powerful local interests. This chapter's initial examination of the two case study neighbourhoods in this setting revealed that *colonias populares* are far from uniform in their characteristics, relating to tenure (which is not always illegal), origins (often driven by political factors), services (extremely varied), and socio-economic characteristics (similarly diverse). These issues indicate the complex and contradictory nature of *colonias populares* in Mexico, which is not always adequately captured by accounts of urban informal settlements.

The brief account of the case study *colonias* therefore undermines some of the more static characterisations of informality outlined and critiqued in Chapter Two. As suggested in Chapter Three, it may be through focusing on processes and relations, rather than categories and typologies, that an increased understanding of the spatial and social

construction of urban informal settlements can be reached. On the basis of the contextual information about the two case studies discussed in this chapter, specific questions can be formulated, relating to gaps in existing knowledge. For instance, these neighbourhoods are integrated to a certain degree within the city; but it is not known how integration processes relate to perceptions of these places. This includes the effect that urban government, through municipal policy, has on the lived reality and perceptions of residents of *colonias populares*. In fact, little is known about how *colonia* residents perceive their place within the city, and how they construct their neighbourhood in relation to this: in other words, about the interaction between residents' perceptions and those of the wider city, and the effect this has on how these places are made. In the context of *colonias populares*, it seems that the discursive, social, cultural and political processes which contribute to place-making are relatively unexplored.

With these issues in mind, the next chapter, which explains the research methodology, opens with a formulation of the research questions, based on the theoretical framework presented in Chapters Two and Three, and the considerations highlighted in the specific research setting discussed in this chapter, as the background for the empirical findings explored in Chapters Six, Seven and Eight.

CHAPTER 5: METHODOLOGY: QUALITATIVE RESEARCH IN TWO *COLONIAS POPULARES*

Seeing, listening, touching, recording, can be, if done with care and sensitivity, acts of fraternity and sisterhood, acts of solidarity. Above all, they are the work of recognition. Not to look, not to touch, not to record, can be the hostile act, the act of indifference and of turning away.
Nancy Scheper-Hughes *Death Without Weeping* (1992: 28)

Introduction

The marginalisation of particular places in the city is not only a theoretical or conceptual issue: it is a lived reality for the residents of these places. Places are isolated spatially, but also socially, as they are avoided, ignored, or simply not known about by the rest of the city. Places like the neighbourhoods introduced in the previous chapter are on the edge of the city in a spatial sense – and are therefore unlikely to have much ‘passing traffic’ – but they are also peripheral in a social sense, in terms of the social hierarchies in the city. The words of Blanca, the young woman living in Loma Bonita mentioned at the start of Chapter One who explained how it was unusual for ‘outsiders’ to visit the neighbourhood, are a reminder of this. The emotional aspect of relations between residents and ‘outsiders’, and by extension between the neighbourhood and the rest of the city, emphasises the human dimension of these places.

My research seeks to capture this dimension by exploring people’s lived experience of place in this context. In particular, I wish to emphasise the perspective of marginalised residents, which is often neglected in academic and policy debates. As the above quotation from Scheper-Hughes (1992) suggests, marginalisation can be as much about indifference as hostility. Based on these considerations, a broadly ethnographic, qualitative methodology was employed, in order to shed light on perceptions and processes which are often ignored or obscured. This chapter discusses this methodology, and the methods employed in the research. ‘Method’ is understood to mean actual data collection and analysis, while ‘methodology’ refers to views about the nature of reality (ontology) and knowledge (epistemology) on which methods are founded (Lees 2003: 107).

This chapter is divided into four sections. It opens with a brief outline of the theoretical understandings which underpin the research, based on the research questions, which are also presented. The mainly qualitative, ethnographic methodology which informed the research design included semi-structured interviews and participant observation, which are discussed in detail in the second section; and solicited photography and focus groups, which are explored in the next section. The final section reflects on some issues around doing intercultural research, especially relating to language, culture and ethics, and the implications of these for broader debates on positionality, identity and representation.

5.1 Research questions, ontology and epistemology

This section presents the questions which guided the research, formulated on the basis of the theoretical and empirical considerations discussed in Chapters Two to Four, which are briefly summarised. It then introduces the ontology and epistemology which underlie the questions and justify the methodological approach.

Research questions

In previous chapters, it was suggested that urban informal settlements are problematised in certain ways in academic and policy discourses. Discourses of informality are dominated by a dualistic conception of 'formal/informal', which suggests simplified understandings of urban informal settlements, based on static categorisations. I suggested that these discourses have the capacity for reinforcing (as well as reflecting) spatial and social marginalisation experienced by the residents of these places, as they contribute to the circulation of ideas which may have material effects for urban residents. Other ways of imagining the city, which highlight social processes, contain the possibility of unsettling this binary thinking separating informal settlements from 'the formal city', by emphasising their potential capacity as 'ordinary places', rather than as isolated or dysfunctional. This is not to ignore the constrained circumstances which contextualise urban informal settlements, but to seek to explore their complexity as places, and in particular to emphasise the residents' lived experiences, in order to unsettle some of these problematic assumptions.

Place-making, the analytical lens applied here, seeks to synthesise elements of lived experience and power in relation to place, and in particular to capture the idea of urban informal settlements as places in process. In the research setting of Mexico, *colonias populares*, which adhere to common perceptions of urban informal settlements in some ways, also contain complex and contradictory processes and relations, suggesting that existing theories may be inadequate to fully explain their spatial and social construction. This includes consideration of how perceptions and discourses interact with and shape place in this context. For example, investigation into the effects of marginalising discourses on these places could help to clarify: how the circulation of ideas materially affects specific marginalised places and people; the social processes which influence these places' integration into the city; and their situation within complex relations of power. 'Place-making' as an analytical concept aims to capture these processes, with an approach that cuts across binary categories such as 'formal/informal'. In particular, the discursive dimension of place-making is emphasised, in order to explore marginalising discourses.

On this basis, the following research questions were formulated:

- How does the discursive, spatial, social, cultural and political construction of place through place-making occur in *colonias populares* in Mexico? How does this illustrate the limited understandings held about these places, particularly in academic and policy discourses?
- How are *colonias populares* discursively constructed as places in the city?
- How does local policy discursively construct *colonias populares*, and what are the effects of this?
- How do residents' place-making activities construct *colonias populares*, spatially, socially and culturally?

The first and overarching question has guided the research, and is returned to in Chapter Nine, the conclusion to this thesis. Underpinning this, the three subsequent questions are respectively discussed in Chapters Six, Seven and Eight. The research aim on which these questions are based makes certain assumptions deriving from the underlying ontology and epistemology, which are more explicitly discussed below.

Ontology and epistemology

The need for reflexivity in social science and particularly qualitative research is well-documented (e.g. Chambers 1995; Cornwall and Jewkes 1995; Smithson 2000; Cupples 2002). As Perlesz and Lindsay (2003: 28) point out, researchers often fail to articulate the ontology and epistemology underlying their approaches: that is, they do not discuss the theories of existence and knowledge to which they subscribe, which may obscure the reasoning behind data gathering and interpretation. The authors suggest a simplified continuum of research metaperspectives: at one end, positivist researchers seek to know an independent, external reality, while at the other, constructivist researchers aim to interpret local and specific realities (Perlesz and Lindsay 2003: 28-9). Somewhere between these two extremes exists the paradigm of the 'post-positivist' researcher who adopts 'a critical realist ontology in which ... reality does exist but can never be perfectly apprehended', allowing for greater theoretical and pragmatic flexibility (Perlesz and Lindsay 2003: 29). Given the multiple interpretations of the term 'critical realist' (best known of which is probably Bhaskar's scientific realism), this stance has been reframed here as a 'critical social' ontology.

Looking at the nature of the phenomena under investigation, and what might represent knowledge or evidence of this, can illuminate the researcher's ontological and epistemological perspective (Mason 2002). My research focus on the spatial and social construction of urban informal settlements is underlaid by an interest in the spatial, social, political and cultural processes which contribute to this, and the structures and constraints which influence them. Reconciling this focus with the perspective outlined above, a critical social research ontology would aim to acknowledge the importance of power and inequality

in social relations (for example, as manifested by the discursive marginalisation of certain places), and seek to examine the material effects of this (for example, how this affects residents), as well as their underlying social causes (for example, urbanisation and inequality) and consequences (for example, the reinforcement and reproduction of marginalisation). Within such a critical social ontology, there is scope for different interpretations of 'reality' dependent on the perceptions of those involved (such as residents, neighbours and officials), and the issues under examination.

Relating to epistemology, the critique of discourses of 'informality' in Chapter Two, relating to the reification and circulation of certain marginalising ideas, suggests a focus on discursive analysis. The critical conception of 'informality' here suggests that the idea should not be taken for granted, but interrogated through critical research. Therefore, my epistemology is influenced by post-structuralist thought, which posits that meanings which language assigns to phenomena cannot be taken for granted (Marshall 1998: 514). According to post-structuralists, language produces the concepts we use to make sense of the world (Hastings 1999: 10). In other words, 'our experience of the world will be shaped by the processes and practices by which we signify or represent the world' (Hastings 1999: 7). Thus the idea of 'informality' influences, as much as it describes, the development of urban informal settlements: hence the research focus on the effects of discursive marginalisation, which may be as powerful as those of spatial marginalisation.

Based on the post-structuralist epistemology and the critical social ontology outlined above, the research methodology needs to be able to explore not just accounts of *what* is happening, but *why*, and how ideas which circulate affect lived experience. In particular, the methodology needs to have the capacity to analyse discursive events or texts as 'concrete instances of social action, providing evidence about social structures and social change' (Hastings 1999: 11). For example, the discursive analysis of certain local level policies in Xalapa, combined with interviews and observations of actors relating to *colonias populares*, might help to explore how discourses of informality from academic research and policy affect the lived experiences of residents. With these considerations in mind, a primarily qualitative methodology seemed most appropriate.

Qualitative methodology

A qualitative methodological approach appears to offer greatest scope for exploring people's perceptions and experiences. In particular, it has the potential to capture some of the complexity of multi-faceted narratives of 'place' as a socio-spatial concept (Holloway and Hubbard 2001). As outlined in Chapter Three, the meaning and significance of a particular place varies according to the differing perceptions of people who relate to it. The complex, intersubjective nature of 'place' means that quantitative methods, which capture numerical and statistical data and excel in terms of specificity (Mayoux 2006), would be unlikely to provide as full an explanation of social processes as qualitative ones. A qualitative approach questions the possibility of 'objectivity' and aims to understand different and competing 'subjectivities' in terms of different accounts of 'facts', meanings and perceptions (Mayoux 2006: 118). It suggests broad, open-ended questions which change and develop over time 'to fill in a "jigsaw" of differing accounts of "reality", unravelling which may be said to be generally "true" and which are specific and subjective, and why' (Mayoux 2006: 118). The selection of a qualitative methodology does not exclude the possibility of mixed methods where necessary.

This seems particularly relevant in the context of urban informal settlements, given the lack of research which looks beyond 'official' stories, based on figures and statistics (Hardoy and Satterthwaite 1989), and the research approach employed here, using 'place' to imagine the 'rich and complicated interplay of people and the environment' (Cresswell 2004: 11), as set out in earlier chapters. Qualitative research normally requires the researcher's long-term immersion in the field, engaging in a reflective process of data collection and analysis (Mayoux 2006). The methodology is concerned with individuals' own accounts of their actions and perceptions, meaning it is richly descriptive and illuminates motivations connecting attitudes and behaviour (Hakim 1987). However, rather than looking at individuals *per se*, its focus is on patterns of social phenomena, and its value lies in the fact that 'people's own definition of a situation is an important element of any social process' (Hakim 1987: 26).

Other theorists agree that qualitative methods are particularly good at exploring phenomena in specific contexts, and hence producing well-founded cross-contextual generalities (Mason 2002). However, some argue that a qualitative approach is not confined to any one unified set of techniques or philosophies, but instead can be loosely defined as a philosophically interpretivist position, based on flexible and sensitive methods of data generation, which involve understandings of complexity, detail and context (Mason 2002: 3); a position which is not incompatible with the ontology and epistemology outlined above. Further, this definition widens the scope of qualitative approaches beyond those solely concerned with people's own accounts, to include techniques from a broad spectrum of disciplines such as ethnography, based on participant observation. This broader definition of qualitative research informed the research design, which was influenced by ethnographic principles.

Ethnographic influences

In the last decade, there has been renewed interest by human geographers in ethnographic methods (Herbert 2000; Lees 2003). Ethnography is defined as relying on participant observation, 'a methodology whereby the researcher spends considerable time observing and interacting with a social group' (Herbert 2000: 551). By participating in the group's daily life to varying degrees, the researcher gains access to everyday activities and symbolic constructions. Ethnography is different from interviews 'because it examines what people *do* as well as what they *say*', providing an opportunity to explore discrepancies between thoughts and deeds (Herbert 2000: 552). The advantages of ethnography are that it addresses the richness and complexity of human life, can deal with complex concepts (like culture), and 'believes in the socially constructed nature of phenomena and the importance of language ... [reminding] us that the researcher only ever gains partial insight' (Lees 2003: 110).

Moreover, ethnography addresses debates around structure and agency outlined in earlier chapters. Based on the notion, expressed by proponents of structuration (such as Giddens

and Pred), that structure and agent are interpenetrated and mutually determined, ethnography helps to 'uncover how structures are made real in the contexts and commotions of daily life' (Herbert 2000: 553). If it is accepted that humans create their social and spatial worlds through processes laden with symbolism and meaning, ethnography has the potential to illuminate relationships between structure, agent and geographic context, through its attention to both process and meaning. It does this through exploring how different social groups meaningfully define and inhabit space (Herbert 2000: 551). In this sense, it is ideal for exploring perceptions and processes relating to place and place-making.

Ethnography has the potential to illuminate place as a spatial, social, cultural and political construction, key issues which the research seeks to explore. As suggested in Chapter Three, people shape places (through their everyday and strategic activities in a particular location), but places also shape people; ethnography facilitates exploration of that relationship, through studying people's everyday use of space and their interpretation of the structures that shape this. If it is accepted that place, meaning and process are all intertwined, ethnography 'is singularly capable of disentangling and explaining these interconnections' (Herbert 2000: 557). Furthermore, a focus on micro-level activities and how they relate to broader structures and concepts is well-suited for the research concern with process, in relation to both informality (as social process, or dynamic tension) and place (as being constantly made). As Herbert puts it, 'No other methodology enables a researcher to explore the complex connections that social groups establish with one another and the places they inhabit, cultivate, promote, defend, dominate and love' (Herbert 2000: 564).

Ethnographic methodology has been subject to some criticism from a variety of perspectives. In response to claims that it lacks objectivity, Herbert (2000) points out that scientific objectivity is itself a social construct, and that ethnography actually provides an opportunity for science to be more explicit about its interpretations. Concerns about representation relate to the risk of ethnographic accounts over-simplifying messy reality, through the researcher's 'mediation' (Herbert 2000). Indeed, some have asserted that

ethnography excels in providing ‘thick description’ and ‘stories’ (Cloke et al. 1991). However, this does not imply that the methodology lacks rigour or academic merit; instead, it suggests honest engagement with the problems of social research, on the basis that people and their realities are different (Cloke et al. 1991).

Because of the power differential that often exists between observer and observed (particularly marginalised groups), it is important for ethnographers to be forthright, reflexive and modest (Herbert 2000). In response to critiques of ethnography as unwarranted intrusion, inquisitional confession or hostile act, Scheper-Hughes (1992: 28) makes a convincing argument for practising ‘good-enough ethnography’, suggesting that

‘The anthropologist is an instrument of cultural translation that is necessarily flawed and biased. We cannot rid ourselves of the cultural self we bring with us into the field any more than we can disown the eyes, ears, and skin through which we take in our intuitive perceptions about the new and strange world we have entered. Nonetheless, like every other master artisan (and I dare say that at our best we are this), we struggle to do the best we can with the limited resources we have at hand – our ability to listen and observe carefully, empathetically, and compassionately’.

According to this view, far from being a tool of oppression, ethnography can provide voice to the voiceless, and attempt to ‘speak truth to power’ (Scheper-Hughes 1992: 28).

Case study framework

Within this qualitative, ethnographic methodology, a case study framework was employed. The main purpose of using case studies is to facilitate the understanding of complex social phenomena, by allowing the researcher ‘to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events’ (Yin 2003: 2). A case study may be compared to a historical account of events, but with additional sources of direct observation, and interviews with actors. In this research project, the purpose of using a case study framework was not to undertake statistical sampling or large-scale surveys, but to produce in-depth research based on an intensive period of investigation in a particular place, in order to further understanding of complex ‘real-life’ events, relating these to conceptual understandings of phenomena. Because of this, the lack of generalisability sometimes associated with a case study

framework was not seen as problematic. Furthermore, statistical significance of findings should not be confused with substantive or practical importance (Hakim 1987). The objective of my research is not to make generalisable claims about urban informal settlements based on empirical observations, but rather to critically explore the potential implications these have for conceptual understandings.

The two case study *colonias populares*, introduced in Chapter Four, were selected with the aim of spending at least a month collecting data in each. The decision was taken to use two case studies rather than a single one, based on the multiplicity of *colonias populares* in Xalapa, and in order to give as full an account as possible by examining different aspects of these places and comparing them if relevant. The idea of using more than two cases was considered, but rejected for practical reasons of time and resources, given the demands of doing in-depth research in each case. Case studies are normally based on two or more methods of data collection, known as triangulation, a technique which strengthens research rigour by using a combination of multiple methods, measures, researchers, theories and perspectives (Denzin 1978 in Perlesz and Lindsay 2003: 27). The two case study neighbourhoods in this project were selected on the basis of certain criteria, such as: being perceived as a *colonia popular* (by residents and non-residents); being located on the periphery of Xalapa; and being relatively established (more than five years old). But they were also chosen for their apparently different situations relating to tenure, size and social mix, which raised interesting comparative questions. Finally, on a practical level, they were selected for their accessibility – physically, on public transport, and socially, based on local gatekeepers' and residents' willingness to participate.

In this setting, most of the research was undertaken during three visits to Xalapa in 2006-07. My first visit took place in July 2006, and lasted one week, with the purpose of scoping the possibility of doing the research there. Two further research trips took place: one lasting five weeks in October and November 2006; and another of five months from January to May 2007. The aim of the second visit was to make contacts and select case studies, and during the third visit I carried out the bulk of the research. My main research activities during these visits were semi-structured interviews, solicited photography, focus groups

and participant observation, during repeated visits to the case study neighbourhoods. During the third visit, research activities were carried out in two phases, the first mostly involving interviewing, and the second involving more participatory activities. Participant observation was continuous throughout each visit, and documentary evidence was gathered as and when appropriate. I conducted most of the research activity myself, in Spanish, without using a translator or interpreter, based on my existing proficiency in the language, which is discussed in later sections.

This section has discussed how research questions were formulated on the basis of the theoretical framework, which incorporated a critique of marginalising discourses of 'informality' and the possibility of understanding places differently through the analytical lens of 'place-making'. The research questions were suggestive of the underlying critical social ontology and post-structuralist epistemology, resulting in the application of a qualitative, ethnographic methodology based on a case study framework. Within this framework, material was gathered using a variety of data sources and methods, discussed at length in the next two sections.

5.2 Methods I: Interviews and observation

This section covers the qualitative methods used during the first phase of the third research visit (January-March 2007). In this period, semi-structured interviews were carried out with individuals to gather information. The visit also involved participant observation, which is discussed later in this section.

Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviewing is also known as qualitative interviewing, due to its dialogical, informal, narrative and contextual nature (Mason 2002). This technique was suited to the study's focus on perceptions of place. It is also an efficient method for a small-scale research project, as it is not particularly resource intensive. The 'snowball' effect which qualitative interviewing engenders (where a respondent mentions the name of

another likely informant, who then mentions someone else and so on) can be a useful way of making further contacts and building up a picture of a situation. In terms of my own research experience, the relatively long time spent in the field made it progressively easier to talk to local people about key issues, and also brought to light other relevant topics for exploration.

Interviews are also an easy way to access certain groups such as state officials or foreign elites, due to their semi-formal nature and the flattering interest they imply (Herod 1999). During the research, access to most respondents (including officials and civil society representatives, as well as residents) was relatively unproblematic, in the sense that people would often be happy for me to interview them the same day, although this sometimes required a long wait at someone's house or outside their office. In fact, arranging appointments in advance worked less well, as they were often cancelled or postponed, perhaps relating to the famously relaxed Latin American attitude towards time-keeping. In general, however, my experience of carrying out interviews was very positive.

The process of interviewing was multi-staged. Interviews were loosely based on question guides, but were open-ended and conversational in tone. Indeed, qualitative interviewing has been defined as 'conversations with a purpose' (Burgess 1984 in Mason 2002: 62). Over the course of the research, 34 semi-structured (i.e. using a rough question guide, and recorded) interviews were carried out, giving more than 40 hours of recording. Most interviews lasted between half an hour and an hour, although some were longer than this. The total number of people interviewed in this way was 42; the discrepancy between numbers of interviews and respondents is due to the fact that some interviews were with more than one person at the same time (see Appendix One for a list of semi-structured interviews). Additional to this, a number of specialist interviews (without question guide or recording) were carried out in the early stages of the research, with experts and academics from within and outside Xalapa. A list of these is included in Appendix Two.

A set of key respondents, divided into four groups – residents, state officials, civil society organisations and non-residents – was determined during the second research visit. The

reasons for choosing each of these groups are outlined below. Key respondents within each group were identified, based on their connections with the case study neighbourhoods and relevant actors there, as well as through contacts. For instance, in the case of Loma Bonita, a community leader (*Jefe de Manzana*), Don Carlos, presented himself as a key informant. In Moctezuma, I was assisted by the local organisation UCISV-Ver (described in detail in Chapter Four), who helped me to set up initial interviews and make contact with residents. While it is an analytical fiction to divide people into neat 'groups' in this way – for example, some 'civil society representatives' were also *colonia* residents – these categories are retained for heuristic purposes, and used here in a brief reflection on my experience of interviewing.

Residents

In numerical terms, the group of respondents with the strongest representation was residents of the case study neighbourhoods. This bias was deliberate, because of the research focus on residents' lived experiences and place-making activities. The number of residents interviewed was partly determined by practical considerations, such as access and time. In Moctezuma, ten residents were interviewed in this way, while in Loma Bonita, the number was 11; however, these figures do not include residents classified as working with civil society organisations, or those who participated in focus groups and in other activities, discussed below. Some of these were historical interviews, with more in-depth questions about the history of the neighbourhood and residents' experiences of arriving there, as a way of getting an overview and historical perspective on the neighbourhoods. As well as these semi-structured interviews, I had informal contact with many other residents of the case study *colonias*, visiting each neighbourhood several times a week over the course of the research. The research focus on place-making and the emphasis on residents' voices made it imperative to talk to as many residents as possible, but did not preclude interviewing other actors in the field.

State officials

The importance of interviewing representatives of local government for my research derived from the focus on relations between *colonias populares* and 'the state'. As

suggested in Chapter Two, the state's role in the urban setting is complex, multi-faceted and shifting, particularly in relation to marginalised areas. Informal conversations during the initial visit directed the research focus towards particular departments, such as the Municipal Office of Urban Development, and the Office of Citizen Participation, requiring repeated visits to Municipal and State offices (see Photo 5.1). Ten semi-structured interviews with local and regional officials were carried out altogether. Officials who were mentioned regularly during interviewing also provided useful leads to follow. One particular difficulty relating to investigating *colonias populares* in Mexico is the overlap between departments, as well as levels of government, in terms of responsibility for different urban functions; although this may be a generalised problem relating to the complexity of systems of government (Ali and Cotton 2006). In practical terms, it meant that the 'snowball effect' was rather overwhelming, as it became difficult to follow up every potential lead.

Photo 5.1: Municipal offices in Xalapa (Melanie Lombard)



Civil society organisations

Civil society organisations often play an important role in the field of informal housing in Mexico, providing economic and organisational support for residents, as well as mediating between them and the state. In Mexico, civil society is frequently associated with urban social movements (discussed in Chapter Four), meaning that organisations are often perceived as politicised, and characterised by high levels of activism. This also generates

suspicion on the part of the authorities, as well as the public (depending on their sympathies towards the organisation's particular cause). Altogether, nine civil society interviews were carried out. During the research, contact with civil society organisations depended to an extent on the case study neighbourhood. For example, Loma Bonita had low levels of community mobilisation, and the only civil society organisation with presence there seemed to be the Casa Blanca Democratic Association (a locally-based group providing assistance to *colonia* residents). Other than that, social activities were organised by community leaders, when they were present in the neighbourhood; a resident who arranged weekly football games and offered football tuition to local children and youths; and the school teacher, who occasionally organised parents' committees. In Moctezuma, a variety of different organisations had been operating there for years, meaning making contact with them was much easier.

Non-residents

Finally, interviews were sought with a group of residents of Xalapa who did not live in *colonias populares*, in order to try and capture the views of people who lived outside the case study neighbourhoods, and did not have much to do with them. This was important given the study's exploration of perceptions of places, both from inside and outside *colonias*. This group of respondents was the smallest, as only two people were 'formally' interviewed, although I had informal contact with many more people through the element of participant observation afforded by living in Xalapa. This meant I had access to wider societal discourses, media views, and informal opinions about *colonias populares* and the specific neighbourhoods. Also, because of the prevalence of *colonias* in Mexican cities, and their heterogeneous, dynamic socio-economic character, many Mexican people have lived in a *colonia popular* at one time, meaning a dividing line between 'residents' and 'non-residents' is somewhat contingent.

Participant observation and analysis

The process of interviewing was complemented by the element of participant observation afforded by residing in the city where research was carried out, for a total of almost seven

months over the course of three visits. Interviewing allowed a level of rapport and emotional engagement to build with certain key respondents, which facilitated both the use of participatory and observational methods.

Participant observation

The specifics of the 'participant observation' method are somewhat opaque: for example, what level of participation is required to qualify as a 'participant', as opposed to a simple 'observer'? Compared to semi-structured interviewing, it seems somewhat unsystematic, in that it can consist of a range of activities, from just 'hanging out' on street corners, to becoming a fully initiated member of a tribe. Certainly, ethnographic accounts from anthropologists often involve living with their research subjects for an extended period of time (e.g. Scheper-Hughes 1992). Relating to the researcher's 'outsider' position, it is questionable as to how much of a genuine participant one can ever be. On the other hand, the idea of being a participant (as opposed to a 'neutral' observer) reflects the impossibility of researcher neutrality that a post-structuralist epistemology implies. Certainly, in my own case, my 'outsiderness' (discussed in more detail below) was compensated to a certain degree by my fluency in Spanish, which allowed me to participate to a much greater degree than I would have otherwise been able to.

Participant observation, then, often involves the researcher coexisting with research respondents in a particular environment, to a greater or lesser degree (for example, living with particular respondents in their home, or renting a room in a case study neighbourhood). Given that the case study *colonias* were located at different ends of Xalapa, and particularly due to the length of time needed to move between them, I took the decision not to live in either neighbourhood. Instead, I chose a central location, about equidistant from the two places in terms of time needed to reach them by public transport. As well as being based on ease of access, this decision also related to other practical considerations, such as the difficulty of using and storing a laptop in a neighbourhood with no electricity. Being in the city centre also meant I had easy access to the diversity of opinions and sources of information there.

Photo 5.2: Social gathering after workshop in *Casa Muestra*, Moctezuma (Melanie Lombard)



My own experience of participant observation sometimes felt incidental or ‘opportunistic’. Some of the most fruitful opportunities for observation were during the interviewing process, when I was invited into people’s houses not just for the interview but also to eat with them, which often meant spending an afternoon or morning with the respondent and their family. The element of ‘coexistence’ or sociability that arose from participant observation also derived from invitations to meetings and events, such as: a Social Housing Forum meeting that I was invited to by UCISV-Ver; an architecture workshop at the National Autonomous University of Mexico in Mexico City, organised by the Technical University of Berlin; and a workshop in Moctezuma. Such events often combined work with social gatherings (see Photo 5.2), and provided an excellent opportunity for observation; for a full list of visits and events, see Appendix Three. Waiting in government offices for state officials also provided a valuable opportunity for observation, and could be as rich a source of information about how a department worked as the actual interview itself.

However, participant observation also implies that everything is valid, meaning it can be difficult to know what to record, and when to stop. The researcher is constrained to some degree by the limits of recording. In my case, this meant mainly note-taking where possible: keeping a regular research journal, and writing down observations as and when necessary, including during or immediately after interviews. In terms of media coverage, I

collected three local newspapers every day for a month (*Milenio El Portal*, *Diario de Xalapa* and *Imagen de Veracruz*, substituting other titles when these were not available), as well as sporadically buying them outside this period. I also collected other documentary sources where available, such as maps and policy documents; for a list of the key policy documents consulted, see Appendix Five. Analysis of such material can cause similar difficulties about how to discriminate between useful information, and overload: for example, with a research journal, descriptive accounts of events are often imbued with emotions. In my research, analysis of the information gathered from observation, as well as interviews, involved exploring patterns of attitudes and related behaviour that emerged. Given criticisms about the lack of transparency relating to analysis in geographic method (e.g. Lees 2003), some brief reflections are made here on the process.

Analysis

In human geography, the lack of discussion about how to analyse qualitative data '[leaves] the impression that qualitative material magically appeared to support arguments' (Crang 2001: 215). Part of the problem seems to be the 'creativity' inherent in the qualitative research process, which aims to capture the richness of context-dependent sites and situations, but may also inhibit proper transparency about analytical process (Bailey et al. 1999 in Crang 2001). Jackson's (2001) detailed account shows that analysis of qualitative interviews is an iterative, laborious and considered process. Both Crang and Jackson agree that the researcher should closely read transcripts, picking out 'codes' from particular words and phrases which can then be further analysed for relations to each other.

The analysis process undertaken in this research project was multi-stage, starting with transcribing. This was an extremely slow process, mainly because the interviews had been conducted in Spanish, which is not my native language. However, transcribing gave me a more intimate knowledge of the information to hand, allowing the construction of key patterns based on recurring themes. In the next stage of analysis, I evaluated the material through reading and re-reading transcripts in the light of my prior assumptions about them, and identified broad topics of interest to generate headings. Then, I constructed a coding structure based on thematic coding under these broad headings, highlighting descriptive or

en vivo terms (words used by the respondents themselves, in Spanish) and extrapolating analytic codes from these (still in Spanish). After coding based on *en vivo* and analytic codes, trends were identified from the co-occurrence of codes, allowing the building up of themes.

In general, the process of analysis undertaken for this research project was more iterative and less linear than I had expected. Often, it seems that the process cannot be neatly separated into stages: while transcribing, analysis starts, and writing may also take place while coding and reading is going on, in order to help make sense of the material. As Crang (2001: 215) says, writing is part of ordering and thinking through the material. But while the process cannot perhaps be neatly separated out into stages, there seems to be agreement on the need for systematic, if not standardised interpretation of data. The temptation may be to look for revelation, something unexpected to validate the work, and to counter the unspoken fear that it contains nothing remarkable, but this is unlikely to happen; rather, the process of analysis is one of incremental development (Crang 2001: 226).

This section's discussion of the key methods employed during the first half of the main research visit, within the qualitative methodology outlined in the previous section, focused on semi-structured interviews and participant observation. Together, these two methods complemented each other, and generated a large amount of material for analysis. The next section turns to more participatory methods employed during the research, which gave rise to a different set of considerations.

5.3 Methods II: Participatory techniques

Despite generating valuable insights and information, I found that the process of interviewing discussed in the previous section was sometimes too structured and rigid, particularly with *colonia* residents. The one-on-one set-up was not particularly dynamic, and the somewhat static format of interviewing was not always engaging for residents. For this reason, participatory methods were used during later phases of the research (April-May

2007). This section discusses the experience of using these methods, particularly solicited photography and focus groups.

Participatory methods

Participatory techniques provide 'a promising epistemological framework' for research which engages with improving people's lives to some degree (Pain and Francis 2003: 47). The pitfalls of participatory methods are well-documented, and some have questioned the possibility of supposedly participatory research achieving lofty aims such as empowering respondents (e.g. Cornwall 2003; Pain and Francis 2003). However, I felt that using participatory techniques in an attempt to engage the residents as fully as possible in the research might also be more likely to capture their experiences and perceptions. Furthermore, participatory research aims to offer space for reflection and increased awareness of relevant issues among participants, as well as for the researcher (Moser and McIlwaine 1999). Some contexts where participatory research is carried out may require contact through other qualitative methods first, in order to overcome sensitivities and establish networks (Mayoux 2006). In this research project, the use of participatory methods was delayed until the second half of the main research visit, giving a fairly short timescale in which to complete the activities (solicited photography and focus groups). This was because such activities required a certain level of rapport, which took time to build up.

Solicited photography

The most engaging and productive participatory technique I used was solicited photography. This involved selecting three residents from each case study neighbourhood and asking them to take at least 12 photos in the neighbourhood, based on four sets of criteria aimed at eliciting ideas about place meaning, namely: positive aspects of living in the neighbourhood; negative aspects of living in the neighbourhood; residents' achievements in the neighbourhood; and special/typical characteristics of the neighbourhood. Most of the participants were selected on the basis of previous contact through the study – people I had already interviewed, or their family members – although not all were found in this way; in one case, I enlisted a respondent spontaneously, on the street. Participants were exclusively female, although not by design: this bias probably

occurred due to more women than men being in the neighbourhood during the day. In the event, several of the participants involved other family members in the activity. At least one participant from each neighbourhood was a teenager, a deliberate strategy to capitalise on solicited photography's advantage as a more engaging way for young people to participate (Dodman 2003). A full list of participants is included in Appendix Four.

The participants were given disposable cameras (in the case of Moctezuma) or cheap manual cameras (in the case of Loma Bonita). The offer of a camera to keep after the research activity was meant to be an added incentive to participants from Loma Bonita, although in the event, manual cameras were more prone to user difficulties and technical problems. Participants took photos over roughly a week, of people, places and things in the neighbourhood, loosely based on the criteria mentioned above. I visited all the participants during the week to check that everything was running smoothly, which turned out to be worthwhile given that some of the manual cameras had stopped working and needed repairing. At the end of the week, the films were collected and developed. A final visit was made to each participant with the developed photos (in some cases fewer than 12 due to technical problems), and a short interview was conducted about the photos they had taken and the reasons behind this, as well as to return a set to them.

Solicited photography allowed engagement with residents in an entirely different way from semi-structured interviews, in that it offered an alternative descriptive method to verbal communication, and gave an insight into participants' perceptual observations of place (Dodman 2003). Despite my concerns that participants might not understand the instructions, most of them (including those who were apparently illiterate) did not seem to have any problem. In fact, photography offered residents a different way of thinking about and capturing concepts which were difficult to talk about in interview, such as place meaning. Participants took photos of a wide variety of subjects relating to their interpretations of the criteria specified. In some cases, photography proved a more fruitful way than interview of eliciting people's ideas on what makes a place different or special, perhaps because of its visual character.

Photo 5.3: Different views of Loma Bonita school (Melanie Lombard/solicited photo, Sandra)



The visual imagery that photography provides allowed for triangulation of data, and also for a much more immediate way of understanding people's perceptions of place. Participants were generally very enthusiastic about participating, with several commenting on how much they enjoyed it. Photography offered a more accessible means of participating in the study, especially for residents who might have otherwise been reluctant to express an opinion or take part in an interview (which occurred several times). The more participatory nature of photography engaged most people easily, allowing them to respond with imagination and creativity (McGregor 2006), and providing a very different perspective to my own observations and photos of the neighbourhoods (as seen in the illustrative comparisons of photos used here, discussed in detail below). The insight into perceptions of place which the researcher may not otherwise have been able to access derives partly from photography's ability to access the emotional perspective of participants, through visual imagery (Dodman 2003; Thomas 2007).

This is particularly relevant in the way the photos have been used in this thesis. Despite some limited guidance on analysing visual material as part of geographic research (e.g. Rose 1996; Bartram 2003), this aspect of using visual methodologies is still relatively unexplored in human geography. Given the lack of guidance, my own approach has been to try, as much as possible, to use the photos collectively, in order to generate a visual impression of residents' 'sense of place' in their neighbourhoods. In the context of this

thesis, the solicited photos are used mainly in the analytical chapters (Chapters Six, Seven and Eight), to illustrate the residents' perceptions of their neighbourhoods. This is in contrast to the photos illustrating earlier chapters (Chapters Four and Five), which were mostly taken by 'outsiders' in the neighbourhoods (myself and occasionally other non-residents), some of which are repeated here for illustrative purposes.

Photo 5.4: Different views of Loma Bonita bus terminal (Melanie Lombard/solicited photo, Sandra)

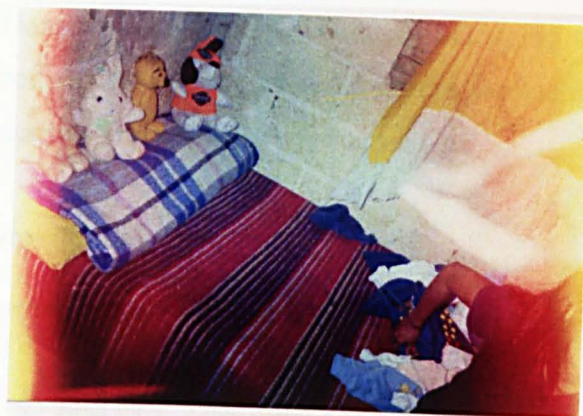
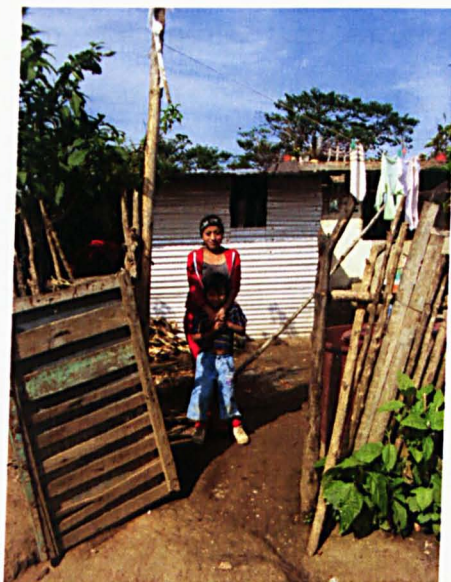


The aim of using different photos in this way is to highlight the differences between them, in terms of how they portray places, and what they choose to capture. For instance, while my photos show the landscape and physical aspects of the neighbourhoods, the residents' photos are much more successful at capturing social aspects, revealing moments when the neighbourhood is vibrant and alive with activity (see Photo 5.3). They also reveal attention to different details (Photo 5.4), and access to places that 'outsiders' would not necessarily have (Photo 5.5). The quality of these photos is sometimes variable, as can be seen, but this does not detract from their impact. The use of photos in this thesis provides an important visual component to the text⁴³. The increased scope for participation could have been taken

⁴³ After deliberation, the decision was taken not to anonymise photos, although the names of participants are pseudonyms (see Appendix Four), similar to semi-structured interviewees (see Appendix One). This was on the basis that residents were quite comfortable to have their photo taken, whereas they were sometimes less comfortable about having a particular opinion attributed to them, especially if it was controversial.

even further, for example through exhibiting participants' work in the city, but unfortunately time did not allow for this.

Photo 5.5: Different views of same house in Loma Bonita, outside/inside (Melanie Lombard/solicited photo, Blanca and Gabriela)



Focus groups

As an additional participatory method, I planned to carry out two focus groups, one in each case study neighbourhood. Focus groups are a particularly good way of providing a group dynamic which may reveal insights (for example, normative or 'public' points of view) not necessarily disclosed in individual interviews (Smithson 2000). This is based on the interactions which take place within them, which may reflect collectively constructed discourses. As such, the aim of using the focus groups was to generate group discussion about the case study neighbourhoods and particular issues there. Techniques for eliciting such discussions within focus groups may include listing or ranking problems, and participatory mapping of the neighbourhood, in order to reveal important spatial characteristics (Moser and McIlwaine 1999: 216). Stimuli such as examples and illustrations can also be employed if necessary (Flick 2002: 117).

In the event, it was not possible to carry out a focus group in Loma Bonita, based on the lack of regular community meetings, which was perhaps an indicator of respondents' concerns about stagnation there (explored more fully in Chapter Seven). The group carried out in Moctezuma was facilitated by UCISV-Ver; even so, it was set up and postponed several times, finally taking place during my last week in Xalapa. The session also over-ran, meaning that time ran out about halfway through the planned activities (perhaps indicating an over-ambitious timetable). In Moctezuma, the group session was attended by eight women, all of whom had participated in the UCISV-Ver housing improvement programme. It took place in the 'Show Home' (*Casa Muestra*) building belonging to UCISV-Ver, which is used as an informal community meeting place for groups associated with the organisation. During the group session, several activities were carried out.

Photo 5.6: Focus group discussion in Moctezuma (Mauro Castro)



Following an introductory activity, the group was asked to outline the main characteristics of the neighbourhood, including problems, positive aspects and factors which make the neighbourhood different from the rest of Xalapa. This form of self-diagnosis is employed frequently within state-sponsored participatory programmes (such as *patronatos* and the *Programa Habitat*) and it was assumed that most participants were already familiar with this technique. The idea was to focus not just on problems but on distinctive characteristics of neighbourhoods, as a way of thinking differently about them. This was followed by an

activity using visual stimuli (photos of different neighbourhoods pasted onto card with their specific characteristics outlined) to generate a discussion about the meaning of the term 'consolidation', particularly important in this context, as discussed in previous chapters.

Once again, using participatory, visual techniques allowed for easier conceptualisation of a difficult concept. By discussing whether various neighbourhoods with different characteristics were 'consolidated' or not, participants also reflected on the situation of their own neighbourhood. The last activity carried out in the group was collective mapping of the *colonia*, which involved working as a group to try and draw a map of the place including key features such as boundaries, main streets, residents' houses and community facilities (as seen in Figure 4.11). The idea was to see how the place was perceived by its residents, and whether there was consensus among residents as to important features and boundaries.

The main advantage of the group was the different communicative dynamic, making it a useful complement to individual interviews. Asking a group, rather than individuals, about key issues allowed for interaction between respondents. The sense of collaboration and co-operation which derived from this perhaps reflected the existing dynamic of the neighbourhood, or at least groupings within it. Talking to the group as a whole also highlighted the diverse experiences of women of different ages, and those who had lived in the neighbourhood for different lengths of time, which was a useful way of exploring change. The mapping exercise was particularly interesting in terms of stimulating collaboration, and agreement but also disagreement among residents; and it resulted in the finding that residents do not have a clearly defined, collective perception of the boundaries of their neighbourhood, perhaps reflecting incremental and non-linear processes of development. Overall, the focus group did not produce a great deal of material (an hour of recorded discussion, the collective map and some other written summaries) but what was produced was extremely rich. Better time management would have allowed for even more use of different participatory methods, such as creating a timeline to map change. This also reflects the problem of working with women in these neighbourhoods, who may be in the

neighbourhood during the day but have far from unlimited time to spare for such activities, given their domestic, childcare and homeworking responsibilities.

The more participatory methods discussed in this section – solicited photography and focus groups – proved more engaging than other qualitative methods for some respondents. They also generated some rich and interesting information, offering different perspectives on issues discussed in individual interviews. Analysis was slightly more difficult, especially given the relatively innovative aspect of solicited photography, meaning processes tend to be less well-documented in academic literature. Visual methods may be particularly useful for intercultural research, as they offer an additional dimension to verbal communication, which is perhaps more prone to misunderstandings in this context. The next section explores aspects of doing research in an intercultural setting.

5.4 Reflections on doing intercultural research

This section discusses some of the implications of carrying out research in a different cultural setting to my own. In particular, language is an obviously problematic issue for researchers working in cultures other than their own, although it may in fact help to highlight considerations about positionality which all researchers should be aware of, a matter which is also discussed.

Language and culture

There is a growing body of literature in geography and related disciplines on the need to problematise language in social science research processes. Scholars (such as Booth 1993; Helms et al. 2005; Müller 2007) have drawn attention to significant cultural differences between culturally-specific academic discourses, and the ‘cultural gaps’ that need to be bridged when doing intercultural and multilingual research. In particular, researchers have criticised the ‘general lack of thought invested in reflecting on the positions of non-English speakers as well as a linguistic power imbalance within “international geography”’ (Helms

et al. 2005). This has elsewhere been linked to the issue of power, as ‘linguistic hegemony empowers some (native speakers mainly) while disempowering others’, allegedly leading to a less rich, less diverse human geography (Hassink 2007: 1282). These concerns may also reflect the lack of discussion by native-English researchers about carrying out research in non-Anglophone environments (although see Smith 2003; Watson 2004; Crane, Lombard and Tenz 2009). With this in mind, I briefly reflect on the experience of carrying out research in a multilingual context.

Doing multilingual research

During the research, I carried out interviews in Spanish without an interpreter⁴⁴, in order to try and get as close to the language and its meaning as possible (Müller 2007). Inevitably, there was a distance between me and my respondents due to my position as an ‘outsider’ which was clearly marked by my use of a language which was not ‘my own’; but as a white, middle-class English woman, other facets of my identity were sometimes more important. My economic status separated me more markedly from some of my respondents than language, while conversely, being a woman afforded me unexpected identification with others. In fact, carrying out research in a bilingual setting gave rise to increased reflexivity, relating to wider questions of identity and positionality, and to the task of representation within the research process.

The sensation of missing nuances and subtleties in interviews was sometimes present, but the excitement of actually doing research in a foreign language overtook this. However, the analysis and writing stage back home in an English-speaking context afforded me further opportunity for reflecting on aspects of intercultural research, in particular relating to language. For example, re-listening to interviews where my understanding was constrained by the limits of my language led me to reflect on ‘what a dolt one is’ (Watson 2004). The issue of how to analyse material in a ‘foreign’ language, while writing about it in my own ‘native’ language, was another concern. The limited guidance available on how to approach this suggests carrying out interview analysis in the original language, and only translating

⁴⁴ My proficiency in Spanish was based on learning it when I worked teaching English in a small city in central Mexico for a year in 2002; I consolidated this with subsequent language classes. This also afforded me a degree of prior knowledge about the Mexican social and cultural context.

excerpts at the final version stage, with footnotes explaining the significance of different terms (Smith 2003). This technique is known as 'holus-bolus', a strategy for maintaining 'intellectual honesty' which also draws attention to the 'contingency of meaning' (Müller 2007: 210). The aim is to produce richer insight into diverse cultural understandings of concepts, as well as maintaining an awareness of the different implications of different terms. Inasmuch as this has been possible, I employed these techniques in my research.

Doing research as a non-native speaker also emphasised certain facets of my own identity as a researcher, and as an 'outsider'. There were occasions when respondents made certain assumptions about my identity as a researcher, which were perhaps quite different from my own view of my positionality (Herod 1999: 324). For example, as a 30-year-old woman interviewing state officials who were around my age, it was hard to know whether to use the polite or informal version of 'you' ('usted' or 'tu'). This was brought to the fore when one respondent, the head of a state department who had studied in Europe, insisted on being addressed as 'tu'. His aim seemed to be to put me at ease, based on his knowledge of English which has only one form of 'you', as well as on his experiences in Europe, where he had obtained a postgraduate qualification. However, my experience of Mexico's quite formal etiquette (where people use 'usted' even with their parents) made me extremely uncomfortable with this arrangement, which created some friction between interviewer and interviewee. Many researchers have reflected on the process of interviewing elites, both in a multilingual research setting (e.g. Herod 1999) and a monolingual one (e.g. McDowell 1998), particularly relating to the unsettling of assumed or expected power relations between researcher and research respondent. On reflection, my discomfort may have arisen from the gap between the interviewee's expectations based on his understanding of my cultural identity, and my own understanding of what was expected in the cultural environment where the research took place. On this basis, I felt unable to 'perform' the identity which the respondent had assigned to me, which appeared to diminish the professional distance between us, leading to my discomfort.

Representation and translation

While it is sometimes portrayed as a relatively unproblematic aspect of multilingual research, translation has been described by some as complex, political and subjective (Müller 2007). Translation demands from researchers a high degree of sensitivity to contextual factors, including cultural difference and similarity, and uneven power relations (Smith 2003). Müller (2007) suggests looking beyond semantics to emphasise the agency of the translating geographer and the critical potential of translation, which requires addressing the institutionalisation of a naturalised meaning hegemony. Seeing language as a reflection of different cultures also allows for consideration of issues about positionality perhaps otherwise overlooked, including aspects such as age, class and gender. It may be that the 'hybrid spaces' which Smith (1996) identifies between intercultural researchers and their respondents should be treated not just a language issue, but rather as the spaces which exist between all researchers and 'others'. Similarly, the issues at stake here, rather than being confined to intercultural and multilingual research, may be related to wider concerns about research in human geography and the social sciences more generally.

But even using strategies such as those outlined above, the issue of language becomes particularly problematic in terms of representing respondents' words and meanings. Even if the researcher only translates excerpts from transcripts, how does she make respondents' voices as authentic as possible when she has changed every word? Literal translation into English is sometimes inadequate to express the subtleties of the concept at hand; or worse, may lead to 'translating the untranslatable' (Hassink 2007: 1286) and the 'Anglicisation' of the text. There seems to be no easy solution to this, although strategies such as multilingual texts help to deepen understanding of the issues at stake. Translating may involve mapping ideas and meaning between and across cultures, and the politics of language use requires attention (Smith 2003).

This also relates to the wider problem of representation in research, which occurs at all levels to some degree, as '[r]epresentation is fundamentally problematic' (Smith 2003: 190). How does one capture the 'messy, creative, fragmented and complex modes of

reality' (Bailey et al. 1999 in Crang 2001: 219) that are encountered during research?
Perhaps the issue is that

'we can never not work with "others" who are separate and different from ourselves; difference is an essential aspect of all social interactions that requires that we are always everywhere in between or negotiating the worlds of me and not-me' (Nast 1994 in Smith 2003: 188-9).

In a similar vein, the limits to being an insider or outsider vary depending on context; even carrying out research in your 'own' culture doesn't negate the need to represent the other, as the issue of representation of others lies at the heart of all research (Robinson 1994).

In this sense, translation and representation may be seen as tasks that every researcher needs to reflect on, at least within the social sciences, in 'translating' the words and meanings of respondents into academic text (e.g. Bennett and Shurmer-Smith 2001). Furthermore, the acknowledgement that different readings of the information gathered may coexist, alongside the critical ontological stance that there are many truths and realities, means the most the researcher can offer is an interpretation of an interpretation, complicated further by her own subjectivity and positionality.

Positionality, emotions and 'going native'

Positionality

The significance of positionality lies in the fact that the subjectivities of the researcher and the researched are strongly implicated in any texts resulting from the research (Robinson 1994). In other words, research is never carried out by an objective, faceless researcher, but is always subject to the researcher's position as well as other relevant factors. Positionality may include social position but also many other factors such as political persuasion, ontological and epistemological stance, physical location during the research and so on. As mentioned earlier, my status as a white foreigner was seen by some as a symbol of the privileged, powerful global North. Being middle class was taken for granted as part of my

being English, but the perceived power difference between me and my respondents was occasionally uncomfortable.

My position as a female researcher caused a different set of considerations to arise, particularly in carrying out cross-gender interviews, which other researchers have reflected on as having a particular dynamic (e.g. Cupples 2002; Rios Sandoval 2009). In Mexico, as in much of Latin America, gender relations are defined according to particular cultural norms often perceived as '*machismo*'⁴⁵, meaning for example that '[Mexican men] will not allow anyone to be disrespectful to women ... woman is always vulnerable' (Paz [1961] 1985: 38). On the other hand, as Paz ([1961] 1985: 38) points out, this 'respect' is often a hypocritical way of subjecting women and preventing them from self-expression. Some accounts of doing cross-gender research in this setting have noted male respondents' dismissal or ridicule of questions from female researchers (e.g. Arendell 1997 in Rios Sandoval 2009). In my own research experience, this was a consideration that occasionally arose when I felt patronised or not taken seriously by male respondents.

On the other hand, it has been suggested that both positionality, and the categories of insider/outsider, are more fluid than is sometimes imagined (Herod 1999). Indeed, my own positionality shifted depending on the situation. For example, given the politicised nature of the low-income housing sector in Mexico, and the suspicion generated by political interests among different groups, it was sometimes useful to play on my 'neutral' position as an apolitical foreigner. However, attempting to fit into the perceived cultural context can backfire, as I discovered arriving late to an appointment in an attempt to counteract the inevitable (so I thought) lateness of my respondent – who had arrived on time, and had been waiting half an hour, resulting in my having to rearrange the interview. It seems that intercultural research forces the researcher to reflect on issues around positionality and reflexivity that might otherwise be less thoroughly considered (Helms et al. 2005). Ultimately, considerations of positionality and 'insider'- or 'outsider'-ness, or whether such

⁴⁵ *Machismo* has been defined as 'a particular social and cultural construction of maleness around the supposed values of the breadwinner, the head of family and the dominant partner in all gender relations' (Munck 2003: 87); although Rios Sandoval (2009: 4) asserts that it is 'essentially a stereotype rather than a useful analytic category'.

distinctions really exist, seem to indicate the need for an open, honest attitude throughout the research process.

Emotions

Ethnographic research involves an engagement of the researcher's senses and emotions (Herbert 2000), and the experience of conducting fieldwork had an unexpected emotional impact on me. Emotions can be a difficult aspect of research to reflect on and convey, although there is increasing recognition of the need to acknowledge emotions in spatial research (Anderson and Smith 2001). Care should be taken not to become bogged down solely by the emotions of the researcher (Widdowfield 2000), and thinking through the emotional implications of research also requires considering the emotional effect on participants (Thomas 2007).

Over an extended period of fieldwork the researcher's emotions may change, going from positive to negative or vice versa, and intensifying or waning (Widdowfield 2000). My initial buoyancy and enthusiasm on contacting respondents and starting the research was replaced by a growing sensation of negativity as time went on. I was increasingly overwhelmed by feelings of despondency and impotence each time I left Loma Bonita during the period of interviewing, which I associated with the visible poverty, poor living conditions and perceived stagnation there. However, in the second phase of the visit, during more participatory activities, the ties of friendship and affection that I had developed previously came to the fore, contributing to my more positive perception of the place. This was helped by the fact that respondents were extremely receptive to participating in the research, and usually very hospitable, particularly in the case study neighbourhoods. This facilitated the research process and also made for a more intimate research setting, allowing me to witness more of the respondents' home lives. Although interviews covered some fairly negative issues, such as marginalisation and poverty, positive emotions derived from respondents' openness and warmth, as evidenced by invitations to participate in community and household events, and their generosity in extending hospitality to an 'outsider'.

'Going native'

By the end of the research perceptible changes in my perspective had taken place, not only on an emotional but also on an intellectual level, relating to the issues being researched. Some respondents mentioned the risk involved in my becoming too closely aligned with one group or person, due to the highly politicised nature of the research setting. Added to this was the need to make contact with as wide a field of respondents as possible, requiring an openness to different groups and individuals. However, this was counterbalanced by the necessity of building rapport with respondents, and my own impulse for intimacy and conviviality. In this sense, my identification with participants became stronger as time went on, despite my reluctance to get deeply involved with an obviously political cause (such as UCISV-Ver's activism).

One particular incident during the research process relating to this concern, as well as to the emotional aspect of the research, was my unexpected visit to the local prison. As mentioned in Chapter Four, Don Carlos, a community leader in Loma Bonita, was imprisoned after allegations of fraudulent land sale. Shortly after, his family invited me to accompany them on a visit to him in prison, which took on greater significance of showing solidarity with them. Thus I found myself in an unusual environment, worth briefly exploring for that reason.

Pacho Viejo, the prison where Don Carlos was being held, was a low, institutional concrete building, guarded by policemen, in an area bordered by tall fields of green sugarcane. Entering, we had to register, show identification, and have food and gifts checked. Next, visitors had to enter a small booth to be given the once-over by a brusque female guard. Inside, it was quite different to what I had expected: it was the men's prison, but during my stay in Mexico, I didn't encounter a more respectful atmosphere, particularly considering that most of the visitors were female. Moreover, it had a convivial ambiance that was quite unexpected. Although he had no way of knowing that I would be coming and hadn't seen me for several months, Don Carlos received me with the unfailing hospitality I had become accustomed to in Mexico. We sat down in the patio area at the back of the buildings to eat lunch with other family visitors, taking our places at a rickety bench sheltered from the sun

by blankets strung up on the trees, a 'table' reserved in this rough restaurant. There were similar tables along the length of the hedge, with inmates and visiting families eating together, adding to the feeling of relaxed sociability.

While we ate the lunch that Don Carlos's family had prepared – chicken, *tortillas*, beans – they discussed how to secure his release as soon as possible. I tried to listen sympathetically and ask occasional questions, but it was difficult to follow the conversation, and even more difficult to know what to say given the sensitivity of the situation. During our lunch, men kept coming up to the table and exchanging words with Don Carlos. They seemed to be less swapping pleasantries than talking business – about what cell he was in, and how to get into it during visitors' hours, to stash the bag of food we had brought him; and other things I didn't get or didn't want to get. Lots of these exchanges involved him giving away plates of food, cups of juice and so on. On our way to the exit, one of our group pointed out the enclosure for rapists and murderers, bringing me back to the reality of the situation with a jolt. Our goodbye with Don Carlos, at the checkpoint where we had entered, was extremely brief: a few words, a nod, and we were walking out.

The emotional impact this visit had on me (and quite possibly my respondents) was profound. Following the visit, I experienced a mixture of emotions, ranging from guilt at not having been able to offer more in the way of support (such as contacts or money); to surprise at the relaxed atmosphere of the prison; and some relief at being able to do something, however small. My concern as to whether I could have done more in this situation relates to the judgement that researchers sometimes have to make regarding how involved to get with their respondents. Fuller (1999) makes the point that an engaged researcher does not make for less valid research, and it is sometimes necessary for the researcher to become more actively involved when the alternative option is to increase harm by doing nothing. Certainly, in terms of showing solidarity with Don Carlos and his family, I was extremely glad I had taken part in the visit. But my recurring sensation that in identifying more, I was seeing less, seemed to be part of 'going native': I was concerned that I was more readily accepting people's explanations, and no longer noticing things that

initially drew my attention. On the other hand, perhaps this is the inevitable effect of ethnographic research, the result of living and being somewhere for a prolonged period.

The challenges of doing research in a multilingual setting, outlined in this section, should not be underestimated, particularly relating to representation and translation of respondents' perceptions. However, these are issues that researchers should consider as a matter of course, even in monolingual settings. The research setting of Mexico offered greater opportunity for reflexivity, relating to my positionality, the emotional aspects of the research, and the potential of 'going native', issues which particularly came to the fore in the story of the prison visit.

5.5 Conclusion

This chapter has discussed the methodological approach taken in the research, on the basis of the theoretical framework and empirical considerations set out in earlier chapters. A post-structuralist epistemology and critical social ontology underpin the critique of dualistic theories of 'informality', and the ensuing suggestion that the complexity of urban informal settlements may be better understood using concepts relating to 'place', leading to the proposal of 'place-making' as an appropriate analytical lens. On this basis, research questions were formulated, in support of the research aim, which is to critically examine understandings of urban informal settlements, based on exploring their complexity through a place-making focus which reveals a variety of lived experiences and perspectives. Using a broadly qualitative, ethnographic methodology in two case study neighbourhoods, certain methods corresponded to specific research questions.

The methods outlined in this chapter all contributed to answering the over-arching research question, **How does the discursive, spatial, social, cultural and political construction of place through place-making occur in *colonias populares* in Mexico? How does this illustrate the limited understandings held about urban informal settlements?.** As well as providing the guiding focus for this thesis as a whole, this question also provides the

focal point for the concluding chapter. Deriving from this over-arching question, three subsequent questions were formulated, corresponding to different methods.

The methods used in the initial stages of the research project, namely semi-structured interviews and participant observation, were found to be somewhat rigid, but generated important material and prepared the way for later research activities in establishing contacts, rapport and opportunities. These methods were suited to gathering information to answer the second research question, **How are *colonias populares* discursively constructed as places in the city?** Given that the question relates to discursive place-making, information to answer this was gathered through interviews with officials, civil society representatives and residents of Xalapa and the case study neighbourhoods, as well as through observation of local discourses (for example, based on press cuttings and television). Similarly, these methods were apt for gathering information to answer the third research question, **How does local policy construct *colonias populares*, and what are the effects of this?** Relating to discursive place-making by local policy, this was primarily based on analysis of local policy documents, complemented by interviews with relevant local authority respondents and residents of the neighbourhoods.

The participatory methods used in the latter half of the research project, namely solicited photography and focus groups, were found to be more engaging, and useful as a form of triangulation. They also provided material that was extremely rich, but possibly harder to analyse for that reason. They were helpful for gathering information in response to the fourth research question, **How do residents' place-making activities construct *colonias populares*, spatially, socially and culturally?** The visual material produced by solicited photography, and the process of using that method, as well as the focus group, really enhanced the information I had already gathered from interviews and participant observation.

The logic behind these research questions influences the structure of the second half of thesis, which presents the findings based on the information gathered using this methodology. Chapter Six presents findings on the discursive construction of *colonias*

populares in Xalapa, relating to the second research question, focusing on the two case study neighbourhoods. This includes a discussion of discursive place-making, and how this relates to academic and policy discourses about informality. Chapter Seven looks at a particular municipal policy as an example of this, on citizen participation, in relation to the third research question. While this is in part a product of specific macro-level processes Mexico is undergoing, outlined in Chapter Four, it also aids consideration of why *colonias* might be constructed in a particular way, and how this relates to discourses of informality. In relation to the fourth question, Chapter Eight turns to residents' place-making activities in their neighbourhoods, and focuses on their perceptions of place meaning, as well as their understandings of how the rest of the city perceives them. Finally, Chapter Nine presents the conclusion to the research, which focuses on how place-making occurs in *colonias populares* in Mexico, and what implications this has for discourses about urban informal settlements, guided by the first and over-arching research question.

CHAPTER 6: MAKING ORDINARY PLACES: DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTIONS OF *COLONIAS POPULARES* IN XALAPA

While listening to the Lady, I suddenly got the feeling that in this entanglement, in this whole poetics of hutches devoted to the wish to live, nothing in Texaco was going against the grain of the city to such an extent as to make that site some sort of aberration.

Patrick Chamoiseau *Texaco* (1998: 244)

Introduction

One of the key problems with the way that policy and academic discourses conceptualise urban informal settlements is that they are seen as outside ‘normal’ urban considerations. They may be viewed as being set apart from the idea of the city, in a theoretical and social vacuum, rather than as part of a specific urban landscape. In the above quotation, Chamoiseau (1998) alludes to this discursive isolation. By invoking the term ‘aberration’, he refutes it, suggesting instead that the ‘hutches’ (houses) of Texaco are definitively part of the city. It is the discursive constructions of urban informal settlements – which may have material effects for residents, as they reinforce and reproduce marginalisation – that this chapter examines. Guided by the research question, ‘How are *colonias populares* discursively constructed as places in the city?’, the chapter explores the discursive dimension of place-making, including its political and marginalising tendencies.

‘Discursive’ relates to sources (texts, images, conversations and so on) that form part of, and reflect, local discourses: this includes individual perspectives, media reports, and official publications. Place-making’s discursive element derives from its social character: as ‘part of an everyday social process of constructing and reconstructing space’, it is a communicative process, as well as an individual mental one (Burkner 2006: 2). This relates to how people talk about, refer to, or imagine places; but also, to the potential effects these discourses have on the spatial, social, cultural and political construction of places. Focusing on how the two case study neighbourhoods (and *colonias populares* more generally) are perceived in the city of Xalapa, the views of local government officials, residents from other areas and members of civil society organisations are contrasted with those of *colonia*

residents and other sources where relevant, to explore how different perspectives interact to discursively construct these neighbourhoods.

The chapter is divided into four sections, based on themes drawn from the research findings about the discursive construction of *colonias populares* in Xalapa. *Colonias* are often portrayed as a manifestation of dysfunctional urban growth, frequently relating to perceptions of their spatial characteristics, which are explored in the first section. As well as being described as ‘anarchic’, these places are often seen as ‘other’, and the second section discusses how social relations there are perceived. This may also derive from their ‘limbo status’ between rural and urban categories, which relates to portrayals of a ‘disorderly culture’, examined in the third section. On the other hand, ideas about self-organisation suggest that in a political context, *colonia* residents are expected to fulfil certain expectations relating to self-organisation, discussed in the fourth section. The chapter concludes with some reflections on what implications these discursive constructions may have for ideas about ‘informality’, in support of the overall research aim, which is to critically examine understandings of urban informal settlements using a place-making approach to explore their lived complexity.

6.1 Dysfunctional urban development

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

Anarchic growth

Uncontrolled urban growth was one of the key characteristics of *colonias populares* highlighted by local government respondents. It was explicitly mentioned by Joaquin, a

civil servant in the Municipal Office of Citizen Participation, as the reason behind Xalapa's public works deficit:

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

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

Some respondents conceptualised the 'problem' in terms of physical factors such as distance and topography. Gustavo, a civil servant from the Municipal Office for Public Works, framed it in this way:

'In terms of time, we could say that Colonia Moctezuma has the possibility of urbanisation⁴⁶ in the short or medium term, and [Loma Bonita] is light years away from achieving it, because prior to its urbanisation, you would need to resolve, among other things, all the other [colonias] that exist between Loma Bonita and the consolidated urban zone of Xalapa. ... The further away it is, the more difficult service provision is, because it all depends on distribution networks, and the location of water redistribution tanks, drainage networks that already exist' (Gustavo 22.02.07).

⁴⁶ The term '*urbanización*' is used in urban policy and local discourses in Xalapa to refer to the development of an appropriate urban layout, in terms of requisite surface areas for lots, blocks and streets, and provision of infrastructure based on this.

This response links spatial characteristics to the local authorities' role in providing services. The notion of a backlog in terms of other existing neighbourhoods implies a spatial (and social) sense of residents having to wait their turn, relating to their peripheral location. However, bearing in mind that a new elite residential development was recently constructed behind Moctezuma, next to the year-old shopping mall *Plaza Americas* located on Arco Sur (see Figure 4.9 in Chapter Four), it seems that providing services to neighbourhoods on the city periphery is eminently possible if they are wealthy enough – in other words, if residents have the ability to pay. This resonates with Meyers' (2003) assertion that the spatial form of Xalapa is determined less by 'dysfunctional growth' than by the interests of powerful elites and the weakness of local spatial policies.

The use of language here is particularly telling. The idea of 'anarchic' growth connotes chaotic places, in a physical sense but also in a social one, seen in the use of terms like 'clandestine', which recalls Everett's (2001) account of the discursive marginalisation of *barrios* in Bogotá. The implication is that these places are problematic because they contain disorder, deriving, for example, from overcrowding:

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

Thus links are made between the perceived physical disorder of these places, and their disorderly social character (a theme which is explored in more detail below). Certainly, spatial marginalisation is often compounded by social isolation, particularly in the case of *colonias* developed on *ejidal* land, which tend to be located on city peripheries, as in the case of Loma Bonita. These are implicitly juxtaposed with orderly, regulated 'formal' areas, which usually occupy a more central location within the city. This suggests, again, that 'official' frameworks find it difficult to account for things and places which are not easily measurable in terms of economic productivity. This conceptual gap in official perspectives may underpin the idea of 'nothingness', which is also found in local discourses.

Nothingness

One strand in local discourses that characterises these settlements in terms of ‘nothingness’ relates to their perceived lack of urban facilities. This can be detected in the description of Loma Bonita by Martin, a representative from the Ejido Chiltoyac⁴⁷:

‘There’s no drinking water, there’s no sewerage, there’s no schools, there’s no churches, there’s no sports grounds – nothing, absolutely nothing’ (Martin 10.05.07).

The idea of ‘nothingness’ as a spatial characteristic was also used by Gustavo, from the Municipal Office of Public Works. Again referring to service provision, he said:

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

This negative framing calls to mind descriptions of ‘slums’ as place where people live ‘like animals’ (Schulman 1966 in Mangin 1967: 66-7), or as ‘dumping grounds’ (Davis 2006: 26). It also contrasts with what was observed in the neighbourhood during the research. As outlined in Chapter Four, there was an official primary school building, a football pitch, and a chapel, as well as a rudimentary water supply piped from a neighbouring settlement, which residents made weekly contributions for. This contrast between the perceptions above and the actual conditions in the neighbourhood is highlighted by Photo 6.1, showing the school, and activities there. These ‘nothing’ places, supposedly anarchic by nature, are in fact much less chaotic than imagined, as well as being filled with activity and material change.

⁴⁷ The *ejido* which originally owned the land where Loma Bonita is established, discussed in more detail in Chapter Four.

Photo 6.1: The school in Loma Bonita, outside/inside (solicited photos, Brenda/Sandra)



It is worth noting that Martin is the elected representative of the Ejido Chiltoyac, which authorised the initial sale of land by the *ejidatario* Crecencio Villa Trujillo to the intermediary who sold the land to the settlers, and who had responsibility for ensuring the correct subdivision. The contrast between Martin's view of Loma Bonita and the observed conditions there is interesting: an elected representative of the *ejido* (to which the land where the neighbourhood is located still officially belongs) might be expected to be aware of its actual conditions. This lack of an informed view about material conditions in the *colonia* may be a form of rhetorical distancing from the neighbourhood on the part of the *ejido*, in order to absolve it of any responsibility. Alternatively, it could be a (mis)interpretation for political reasons, discussed in more detail below with relation to these places' 'limbo' status.

Bruno, a resident of Xalapa living in the city centre, used similarly negative language to describe a *colonia* where he had previously lived, although in the response below, he goes on to elaborate in more detail about the neighbourhood's actual conditions at the time of sale of plots:

'There wasn't anything, there weren't streets [laughs] – nothing. The lampposts were there, the drainage was already connected, but there was no paving in the colonia. ... The only thing there was drainage, and electricity, but not water. So then ... you build your house, and you connect yourself to the drainage, and to

water and electricity. ... My dad bought land there ... from the person who had subdivided, the person in charge of setting up a colonia there' (Bruno 24.05.07).

This response highlights the multiple variables involved in the development of *colonias*. Rather than being uniform, the level of services in a place and the degree to which it is 'urbanised' depend largely on local factors, such as the characteristics of the actual site and the propensity of the subdivider, as well as levels of local government intervention. As many observers (e.g. Ward 1999) have pointed out, most *colonias populares* in Mexico are the result of illegal or semi-legal subdivision and sale of *ejidal* land⁴⁸. Indeed, the idea of 'nothingness' as a spatial characteristic could be based on the nature of these transactions, which in legal terms are 'non-existent' (Azuela and Duhau 1998: 159). While this means these neighbourhoods develop on the margins of legality, the element of subdivision undermines the idea, still commonly found in academic and policy discourses, that 'informal means unplanned' (Castillo 2001 in Varley 2008: 7). Although they may not be subject to official regulatory frameworks, the majority of *colonias* resulting from illegal or semi-legal subdivision are 'planned' to some degree, first by the landowner or intermediary, and later by the residents.

In fact, the obligation on the subdivider to provide a basic level of infrastructure, and the degree to which this is fulfilled (which may range from land being sold in its former agricultural state, uncleared and with plots barely marked, to *colonias* which are neatly divided with some basic services installed) could be seen as a form of semi-legal master planning, within the semi-legal *ejidal* land market. But these processes overlap and merge with more formal ones rather than being totally separate from them, or 'mirroring' them in terms of being an exact, informal copy of them. Similarly, rather than being based on government strategy, allocation of land depends on the buyer's ability to pay for it, sometimes alongside other criteria such as presence at meetings (an issue which is explored further in Chapter Eight, relating to residents' place-making activities). It could be said, then, that development is 'market-driven and serendipitous' rather than planned or

⁴⁸ The semi-legal status of these transactions derives from the 1992 Constitutional Reforms which gave individual title holders in the *ejidos* the right to sell their property, but not to subdivide it. See Chapter Four for a more detailed discussion.

controlled by the state (Austin 1994: 333). It is perhaps this lack of control that leads to perceptions of these places as an unwanted responsibility, and hence a burden or drain on the resources of local authorities.

Unwanted responsibility

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

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

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

The conception of settlements as a burden or negative presence in the city seems to accord with the idea of ‘nothingness’ discussed above, which could also be seen as expressing an implicit desire for a blank slate, and perhaps reflects planning authorities’ inability to deal with existing settlements. This calls to mind the *tabula rasa* approach sometimes taken by planning, when authorities pay little or no heed to a place’s social assets, which may be based on productive but also intangible elements, in favour of formal, large scale ‘regeneration’ projects (Martí-Costa and Bonet-Martí 2009: 127). The effect of characterising a neighbourhood in such terms of ‘nothingness’ is to devalue its place in the city, and can even serve to justify interventions on terms which may be less than favourable to existing residents.

Photo 6.2: Traffic in central Xalapa (Mauro Castro)



Commentators in local newspapers also perceived the changing city as the result of lack of capacity for urban management. For example, in the *Diario de Xalapa*, Ricaño Escobar (2007) blames poor city management and unaccountable local government for Xalapa’s dilapidated historic centre, deficient public services and congested road system (see Photo 6.2); these problems derive, according to the author, from 50 years of chaotic growth, which started with the settlement of *colonias populares*. This discursive link between the overall deterioration of the city and the historic development of *colonias* seems fairly common in public opinion. Similarly, Velázquez Álvarez (2007b) in the *Milenio El Portal* describes Xalapa as suffering the ravages of growth without planning. The perceived lack

of capacity for strategic planning is a problem in Xalapa, in the context of limited resources and rapid urban expansion (Villanueva Olmeda 2002); but it may also reflect political priorities relating to resource allocation (Meyers 2003). Moreover, despite *colonias populares* being portrayed locally as a drain on the urban landscape, echoing certain academic accounts (e.g. Davis 2006), they are also sites of productive processes. This issue is explored in more detail in Chapters Seven and Eight, through analyses of place-making by policy and residents.

Colonias populares, then, seem to be perceived as evidence of ‘dysfunctional’ growth patterns in Xalapa, particularly relating to their physical or spatial characteristics, as discussed in this section. This can be seen in the negative qualities that are discursively associated with these places: they are ‘anarchic’ places, ‘nothing’ places, which represent an unwanted burden on local authorities. All of these characterisations can be found in academic and policy discourses about ‘slums’, discussed in Chapter Two. Moreover, in the specific local context these descriptions say something about the relationship between *colonias populares* and the rest of the city, represented to a degree by the local authorities (but including other actors too). In terms of local authorities’ inability to plan for growth, it is worth recalling Roy’s (2005: 153) assertion that urban informality is the ‘state of exception’ produced by the sovereign state, as it determines what is legitimate and what is not. In this sense, it is actually the state that constructs *colonias* as ‘dysfunctional’, through its categories of ‘planned/unplanned’, ‘formal/informal’ and so on. The ‘dysfunctional’ spatial attributes of *colonias* are compounded by their perceived social marginalisation, which is explored in the next section.

6.2 Another world

In a casual conversation during the course of my research, a resident of central Xalapa remarked to me that *colonias populares* are ‘another world’, remote and different from the rest of the city. This seems to aptly express their social isolation within the city, as places (and people) which are ‘other’, perceived as not ‘belonging’ to Xalapa. Three related issues

arising from the research are explored in this section, namely: crime and insecurity; distance and discrimination; and 'ordinary places'.

Crime and insecurity

Non-residents of the case study neighbourhoods seemed to relate the 'unknown' aspect of these places to perceived social characteristics of their residents, expressed in quite negative terms. Macarena, a non-resident who lived in another, older *colonia*, had heard of Loma Bonita through her church, which had collected charitable donations for the neighbourhood. She told me that

'It's known round there for people who are a bit bad, vandals, abusive people'
(Macarena 14.03.07).

The same respondent mentioned that she had heard of a case of rape on the road leading to Loma Bonita, although this was not substantiated. Similarly, a sample of reports from local newspapers revealed characterizations of *colonias populares* as places where the drugs trade is rife, and police presence minimal (Morales 2007); where persistently poor living conditions exist (Rojas 2007); where buyers of land are defrauded (Yonca González 2007); and where the police raid garages in search of stolen vehicles (Salazar 2007). This is not to undermine the veracity of any of these accounts, particularly as local newspaper reports often tended to adopt a sympathetic attitude towards *colonia* residents, for example in their efforts to obtain services. However, these local media images may have been influenced by depictions in the national news of '*barrios bravos*' (rough neighbourhoods) at that time, relating to the demolition and eviction of *colonias* in Mexico City considered to be harbouring criminal activity (e.g. Marín 2007; Martínez 2007; Santos 2007), as mentioned in Chapter One. It is possible that such depictions, at the level of national (general) and local (specific) discourses, could interact with generalised perceptions of *colonias populares*, both reflecting and reinforcing them.

This tone was echoed in a discussion with members of the Ejido Chiltoyac, who expressed concern about the changing 'sense of place' in the area around Loma Bonita. Previously, it

was a known, familiar and safe place for *ejidatarios*, where they would greet fellow *campesinos*⁴⁹ working their land as they made their way to Xalapa on the *Antiguo Camino a Chiltoyac* (the Old Chiltoyac Road, the access road from Xalapa to Loma Bonita). Now, the newcomers who inhabit the land are almost entirely unknown to the *ejidatarios*, and it has become somewhere unsafe, with unfamiliar, possibly drunken or unpredictable people living there (Martin and Eduardo 10.05.07).

The idea of insecurity as the result of change over time situates the social development of the *colonia* within a process of changing land ownership, in a *de facto* (and ultimately *de jure*) sense. The *ejidatarios*' sense of safety and security seemed to be based on time, experienced as continuity and stability: whereas changing ownership constitutes a rupture in this stability, and a corresponding change in sense of place. Informal settlement residents' awareness and expectations of the temporal dimension of place have been well-documented: for example in Ward's (1999) citation of Lloyd's (1979) 'slums of hope' to describe *colonia* residents' expectations of eventual improvement, mentioned in Chapter One of this thesis. However, the emotional response of former landowners to their alienation from a once-familiar place does not appear to be widely considered in academic literature on urban informal settlements. In this case, the sense of alienation is based not just on transferral of legal titles, but changes in the actual possession and use of the land over time.

In contrast with these negative perceptions from outside the case study *colonias*, people who lived in them generally stressed the tranquillity of their neighbourhoods. In Loma Bonita, residents reported that it was quiet and safe. Some made a point of differentiating the neighbourhood from other places they had lived previously where gangs were rife, such as Eliza, who lived in Loma Bonita with Isaac and their three children:

ML: *Is there something which you would say is typical or characteristic of the colonia, which distinguishes it for example from [Colonia] Higuera?*

⁴⁹ Often translated as 'peasant', in this context the word is more likely to mean rural people or agricultural workers.

Eliza: Yes, you don't get gangs gathering, or criminals, and over there you do, there's loads. They steal things, mostly at night time.

ML: Are they young people, or who?

Eliza: They're young people. ...

ML: What do they do, why do they form gangs?

Eliza: They take advantage of people going by, they hit them or they take their wallet, whatever.

ML: And that doesn't happen here?

Eliza: No, not here (Isaac and Eliza 20.05.07).

Residents were generally keen to point out that their neighbourhoods were peaceful (*'tranquilo'*), a word that occurred with frequency. As in the above response, they often compared their own neighbourhood favourably to surrounding settlements, highlighting the negative social characteristics of other *colonias populares*. In Moctezuma, where security was mentioned by some residents as more problematic, the perpetrators of crime were thought to be residents from neighbouring areas such as Colonia Miguel Aleman, located directly behind Moctezuma (e.g. Magdalena 14.02.07). Some respondents contrasted their neighbourhood with other 'disorderly' places just beyond their boundaries, as in the latter case, or in other cases as far as the city centre. Camelia, a resident of Loma Bonita, saw the centre of Xalapa as a fearsome place where children could be stolen (Camelia 16.03.07). Varley (2007: 20) suggests that residents may undertake 'othering' of people and places partly for fear of being themselves disparaged, but also as a marker of identification with 'home' as private domain: not necessarily in an exclusive or hostile way, but as a place of temporary respite from interaction with others, in the context of crowded living conditions.

Distance and discrimination

The social characterisation of *colonia* residents as 'other' in local discourses seems to relate to the sense of discrimination that the residents themselves feel regarding their social position in Xalapa. The word '*olvidado*' ('forgotten' or 'neglected') was frequently used by residents of Loma Bonita to describe how their *colonia* was viewed in the city. This often related to a sense of being remote or distant (*'alejado'*). A sense of this is captured by

Photo 6.3, which shows *Torre Animas* (Animas Tower), a landmark in central Xalapa, just visible from the road to Loma Bonita (see Figure 4.6 in Chapter Four).

Photo 6.3: From Loma Bonita access road towards Xalapa city centre (Melanie Lombard)



This again highlights the relation between social and spatial marginalisation, as explained by Sandra from Loma Bonita:

'[The Municipality] doesn't remember here, they only remember the centre, not the more distant colonias. ... Now we need lots of services here, and we go [to the Municipality] ... and they never pay attention. They say, "Yes, soon" and no, the service never comes. Like the rubbish cart – we requested it and they said "Yes, it's going to come today" – and it never came!' (Sandra 22.03.07).

Later in the discussion, Sandra described the discrimination experienced by residents in more detail:

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

This account emphasises the 'limbo status' that Loma Bonita finds itself in, between the Ejido Chiltoyac and the Municipality of Xalapa. While the neighbourhood is awaiting

regularisation, the land is still legally part of the Ejido Chiltoyac. However, as far as the *ejido* is concerned, it is now the Municipality's responsibility; indeed, it is registered with certain municipal departments relating to residents' requests for services, as well as for welfare programmes (Natalia 01.05.07).

Because of this situation, it is quite plausible that residents of the *colonia* find themselves in a gap in terms of access to services, such as health care, which are not directly available in the neighbourhood. While the *ejidatarios* view the *colonia* as having made the transition to urban status, for the residents and the rest of the city there is still a sense of spatial and social isolation relating to its 'rural' character (discussed in more detail below). However, residents' attitudes to this stigmatisation seem to be characterised by resistance rather than passive acceptance. Continuing her narrative, Sandra commented:

'The truth is, I've never been treated like that, not me. Well, once a nurse wanted to treat me like that, but ... I'm not going to let anybody treat me like that. ... They've always attended to me, because I'll fight with them and they have to see me' (Sandra 22.03.07).

In this way, she revealed a reluctance to portray herself as a victim, implying that she resisted the discriminatory treatment she felt she was receiving.

On the other hand, Colonia Moctezuma, which is closer to the city centre and does not have the same issue with land titles, also seems to suffer from a degree of social isolation. Gracia, from Moctezuma, made an interesting point about the perception of Xalapa from within the neighbourhood:

'We do feel a bit separate here, because [laughs], well, here, this is Xalapa, right? But then [residents] say, "Let's go to Xalapa". So I say, "Well if this is Xalapa, how are we going to go to Xalapa?" [laughs]. [And they say,] "Well, let's go to the centre, then", that's how it is' (Gracia 14.02.07).

This reveals a rhetorical connection linking physical distance to the perceived 'social gap' between these places and the rest of the city, on which the marginalisation of *colonias* is

based. These accounts are also suggestive of a perceived difference between legally-protected 'citizens' and marginalised urban dwellers (Chatterjee 2004). The element of social stigmatisation and devaluing of places and people seems to be related to their normative categorisation as 'abnormal', rather than as 'ordinary'.

Ordinary places

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

For example, Olga described how she had tried to encourage reforestation in Moctezuma, in contrast with other residents' more prosaic requests:

'There are lots of people here who complain because there isn't paving, but to me that seems a minor problem. ... The question of reforestation seems very important to me. I'm trying to do it here, in a small way, as much as one can, to have plants, trees, not very big ones, but to encourage people. ... I don't think people would accept it, but I think that we have to fight a bit more for green streets where they've cut down our trees' (Olga 05.02.07).

While the living conditions in these places may be constrained by hardship, this does not preclude residents' having aspirations relating to aesthetic and environmental concerns, indicating an interest in issues beyond their immediate necessities. Olga's response

highlights the fact that *colonias populares* are social places made by humans – as much as (or even more so than) other neighbourhoods – which contain a mixture of hope and conviviality, albeit in constrained living conditions. This contrasts with some of the more dehumanising depictions of slums as ‘surrounded by pollution, excrement and decay’ (Davis 2006: 19).

The ‘ordinariness’ of these places can also be found in their heterogeneous and fluid nature. Their residents do not see them as static places, but as places in flux, subject to change. Varley (2007: 8) suggests that *colonia* residents see home ‘more as something in process than as something static or fixed’, reflecting the incremental nature of housing in this context, and the fact that low-income houses are rarely regarded as finished. In a similar way, these neighbourhoods undergo continual change, not only spatially but also socially; an issue which has long been noted (e.g. Bromley 1978), but continues to be underplayed in accounts equating informality to poverty (e.g. De Soto 2000).

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

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

This suggests an upwardly mobile population, as families consolidate their dwellings. Bruno explicitly linked the idea of progress to demographic changes which neighbourhoods experience as children grow up and move out of family homes:

‘Some colonias had too many people before. But now 20 years have passed and ... now the [whole] family doesn’t live there. ... There are houses where only two people live – before, they were houses where 12 people lived. ... So spaces grow, there are fewer people left – so they start to organise better. Because really, to organise so many people without the resources, it’s difficult’ (Bruno 24.05.07).

As well as highlighting the ‘bottom-heavy’ demographic characteristics which often prevail in newer *colonias* (such as Loma Bonita), this also suggests a long-term trend that counteracts the overcrowding envisaged as characterising these places. Bruno makes an inverse link between social organisation and number of residents, implying that fewer (young) residents means greater shares of resources. This also suggests patterns of densification and change that are as complicated as anywhere else in the city, as *colonias* experience life-cycle changes which impact on their social structure, just as other areas do.

Photo 6.4: Different housing in Moctezuma (Melanie Lombard)



This aspect of social change also implies heterogeneity: as *colonias populares* are places of social mobility, they contain socio-economic diversity. As Bruno pointed out, discussing his own previous experience of living in a *colonia*:

‘There were people three houses from mine ... who bought two plots, three plots and they built enormous houses. And there were people who bought a smaller plot, and they built a small house. ... They all built depending on their economic situation’ (Bruno 24.05.07).

The observation that different house sizes reflect residents’ different economic situations is unsurprising, given *colonias’* underlying market logic. This implies that these neighbourhoods cater for middle class residents too, who may take advantage of the ‘irregular’ situation regarding planning regulations, land prices and plot sizes. The socio-

economic diversity in these places belies the idea of a static, low-income social stratum as the sole source of inhabitants of *colonias populares*; and it complements the conception of urban complexity contained in these places (e.g. Simone 2004). It should be noted that heterogeneity and diversity may extend downwards, as well as upwards: for example, in Moctezuma, newly-invaded areas contrast starkly with other housing there, and particularly with some of the larger, more expensive-looking houses (see Photo 6.4).

This section has shown how *colonias populares* are sometimes discursively constructed as ‘another world’, where crime and delinquency exist in a setting of spatial and social isolation. However, the ‘othering’ of these places, and the people who live in them, can be by residents as well as ‘outsiders’. Residents’ ordinary aspirations, alongside the shifting social complexion of these neighbourhoods, reveal that the social reality of *colonia populares* is as mundane and as extraordinary as in any other part of the city. Attempting to see these places as ‘ordinary’ does not mean losing sight of ‘the not inconsiderable constraints of contestations and uneven power relations’ within which they exist, as Robinson (2002: 546) points out; but it suggests the potential to see their residents as citizens, as much as any other resident of Xalapa. This also means reassessing negative characterisations of these places, seen in certain recurring themes such as the idea of ‘disorder’.

6.3 Disorderly culture

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

Autonomy

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

'In the ejidos they really need social education, because in Colonia Moctezuma, there are people who go to school ... but it also depends on upbringing by the parents. Because if the parents themselves – if we don't educate our children to keep our property clean or to keep the street outside our house clean, then that culture is going to continue and it won't improve, the same as in the ejido. I mean if the first person who sold [the land], didn't have the decency to think "First of all I'm going to go to the Municipal Offices", but "I do what I want because I want to, and why should I have to go and ask somebody's permission?" – because in the ejido that's how it is, eh? "No, I'm autonomous, I don't have to go telling the Municipal Government that I'm going to subdivide". So it's a culture, but it's that of people who are part of the settlement' (Wanda 21.02.07).

Here, the respondent links the autonomous⁵⁰ rural character of the *ejidos* with the disregard for regulation shown by illegal subdivision, through which the majority of informal development occurs in Mexico. She also draws a parallel between this situation and the perceived living conditions of *colonias* that originate on *ejidal* land, implying a disrespectful 'culture' on the margins of urban society and of legality. A link is made between how people live, in terms of disorder, and why they live like this, in terms of their 'culture', harking back to deterministic 'culture of poverty' theories (e.g. Lewis 1967).

Wanda's response explicitly relates this culture to a more generalised lack of 'education'⁵¹ or upbringing among *colonia* residents, and their supposed 'autonomy', outside the jurisdiction of the Municipality. The *ejidos*' autonomy from the municipal sphere of influence implies that its members are outside the category of citizenship, at least in urban terms: they are exempt from participating in urban affairs. But when *ejidal* land is

⁵⁰ The politically autonomous character of the *ejido* is enshrined in the early twentieth century Presidential decree that created them (Ward 1999). See Chapter Four for more details.

⁵¹ The Spanish word '*educación*' refers not only to formal education but also to manners in this sense.

transformed into a *colonia popular*, the 'new' residents occupy an uncertain position. Wanda's response implies a judgment about residents' lack of citizenship skills: these residents are not skilled to participate in the urban sphere, and therefore, cannot be considered part of the city. The ideas and norms on which these constructions are based are discussed in more detail in Chapter Seven, relating to Xalapa's Citizen Participation policy. 'Autonomy' also seems to relate to residents' perceived individualistic lack of concern for the collective good – whether this is embodied in a properly regulated urban area, or a clean street – recalling the idea of 'anarchic growth'. In this sense, autonomy is seen as a problem, in contrast to the heroic narratives of 'freedom to build' and self-help (e.g. Turner 1972) and entrepreneurialism and legalisation (e.g. De Soto 2000) outlined in Chapter Two. The notion of the collective good also implies normative judgements about what is acceptable, expressed in ideals such as order and cleanliness.

Order and cleanliness

Bruno mentioned the notion of disorder in *colonias populares* as part of a general lack of concern about acceptable behaviour, which he saw as:

'Keeping the volume of your stereo down to a certain level, or keeping ... your street clean, among other things: for example, having a party, and all that. Also how to maintain public order there. Because generally in those types of colonias, public order isn't that common. Public order, no? As it should be. That's why I think there are problems in the colonias' (Bruno 24.05.07).

'As it should be' implies a normative set of conditions to which *colonia* residents are failing to conform, similar to Wanda's comments about disorder and disrespect for authority. Instead, these responses suggest that a disorderly culture is embodied in residents' behaviour, for example in their failure to keep communal (not to mention individual) property clean.

In fact, both of the above respondents made an explicit link between disorder and cleanliness. Wanda related this to the need to keep individual properties and the streets clean, extending the need for cleanliness from private to public space; and Bruno also

mentioned the cleanliness of the streets as a norm of acceptable behaviour. Later, he returned to this theme:

'It's chaos being there, living in those colonias populares because you get there, and then you can't do anything, I mean ... you keep your space⁵² clean, but everyone else keeps their spaces dirty, and your space gets dirty. So the moment comes when you don't want to clean your space any more because you're like, "What should I clean it for, really?" That happened in my house, in my case. Although there was a fee for the maintenance of the colonia, there was never any maintenance in the colonia' (Bruno 24.05.07).

The 'fee' refers to a service charge for communal cleaning set up by the residents themselves, an example of self-organised service provision as discussed in Chapter Four. While this response reveals the residents' collective initiative, it simultaneously highlights the perceived problem of co-operation in these neighbourhoods, implying that it somehow broke down in this case, despite the regular service payments.

Photo 6.5: Rubbish in Loma Bonita and Moctezuma (solicited photos, Sandra/Olinda)



The theme of cleanliness was also mentioned by Olga, a long-term resident of Moctezuma:

'Twenty years ago when we arrived here, Xalapa was beautiful. It was the State capital, and it looked like it, it was clean. But now, so many people have arrived [and] there's no culture of rubbish [collection], of only putting it out

⁵² The word 'espacio' used here implies a dimension of private or 'personal' space, which it may be hard to find in *colonias populares*.

when the lorry comes. No, they put it out there [on the street], and the guardians of the colonias ... are the dogs' (Olga 05.02.07).

This respondent makes an explicit link between cleanliness and overcrowding in *colonias populares*. The theme of disorderliness is revealed in the use of language such as 'chaos', and the use of powerful animal imagery: dogs prowling the neighbourhood, scavenging from the rubbish left out on the streets. On the other hand, this perception of disorder on the part of a resident of Moctezuma points to the lived reality of these places, relating to the unequal provision of services and facilities within the city (see Photo 6.5). It is also related to the particular municipal 'culture' of waste management in Xalapa, which fosters the idea of a daily rubbish collection⁵³.

Another example of the lived experience of these 'disorderly' places is given by Olivia of Moctezuma, who described the difficulty of arriving at a job in the city centre with clean shoes:

'If it rains a lot, what I sometimes do, I used to get out my little cloth [when] I arrive there at the avenue. ... You see we worked in an office [selling] my clothes, so ... I'm not going to arrive with [muddy] shoes [laughs]. So I get out my little cloth, I clean myself up and let's go [laughs]. Yes, yes. The other thing is the advantage of pavements, but when there wasn't a pavement, you didn't think about going out eh? I used to be like "How am I going to do this?" [laughs]. When it's really horrible sometimes, you don't want to come in for the same reason, because it's so horrible' (Olivia 05.02.07).

This response portrays issues about cleanliness from a different perspective: that of a resident who, from necessity, has developed innovative responses to problematic living conditions. Indeed, the powerful symbolism of maintaining clean clothing in the face of adverse conditions in urban informal settlements has been noted elsewhere (Neuwirth 2005: 85). But seeing this as a practical issue which originates from the neighbourhood's lack of services removes its moral overtones, and diminishes the 'cultural' dimension of disorder.

⁵³ The archaic system of rubbish collection in Xalapa city centre, which has been in place since the 1960s, involves rubbish trucks making daily rounds between 4:00 p.m. and 7:00 p.m., accompanied by a man running alongside ringing a bell to alert people. Leaving rubbish out on the street before or after the truck passes incurs a fine (Alfonso Torres 21.05.07).

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

Rurality

The idea of informal settlements as rural communities translocated to the city, where rural migrants to the city who have failed to complete the 'rural-urban cycle' live (Abrams 1964), has long been undermined by findings to the contrary (e.g. Mangin 1967; Perlman 1976). However, a persistent perception of residents as having a 'rural' cultural identity continues to figure in certain narratives. For example, Neuwirth (2005: 11) describes a process of 'massive migration from rural regions to urban centers of the world ... [a]nd always, once they got to the cities of their dreams, the migrants have become squatters'. This may relate to the development of informal settlements on formerly agricultural, peripheral land which in Mexico results in the 'limbo status' of *colonias* falling between the jurisdiction of the *ejido* and the municipality (further discussed below). This 'rural' characterisation could be discerned in local discourses in Xalapa: residents of the case study *colonias* frequently mentioned how the label '*rancho*' (literally 'ranch', or 'farm') was used in the city to describe their neighbourhood.

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

'They say that we're very, like, very modest⁵⁴ or, country bumpkins [arranchados]' (Sandra 22.03.07).

The wording used also seems to imply a link between the rural nature of these places and traditional ways of life. In the Mexican urban context, being seen as having rural customs implies a backward and perhaps even anti-modern outlook (Varley 2008). Certainly,

⁵⁴ The Spanish word used here, '*recatado*', connotes a sense of demure or reserved: in this context, it could also imply being introverted or 'backward'.

labelling a place or its residents as 'rural' within the context of the city seems to have pejorative connotations, as well as discursively separating the place and its people from 'the city'.

This also seems to relate to the process of 'othering'. Once again, this is not necessarily restricted to perceptions from outside *colonias populares*. Sandra used a similar characterisation about her neighbours in Loma Bonita:

'[In the neighbourhood] people are a bit modest: they don't get very into the modern ... they keep with the old, [for example in] the way they dress. ... About half the residents are [integrated] and the other half are ... a little bit more distant, like I say, because of their point of view, or their customs, where they come from, in their town [pueblo], their farm [rancho]. I think that's the reason for the difference' (Sandra 22.03.07).

Sandra's use of the word 'distant' ('*alejado*') here is interesting, as it highlights her perception of the spatial but also cultural and social distance that exists between the more 'rural' residents and the city. Her response also exposes the social and cultural diversity that exists among residents, who differentiate among themselves on this basis. There is a detectable ambivalence here, with Sandra including herself in discrimination against the *colonia* at city level, but setting herself apart from her '*rancho*' neighbours at neighbourhood level, a form of intra-settlement 'othering'.

The social and cultural diversity implied here also brings into question the supposedly homogenous 'rural' cultural character of these places: this is reflected in the residents' varied places of origin. Both case study neighbourhoods are notable for the high number of residents who were born elsewhere, and many respondents in Moctezuma remarked on the diversity of their neighbourhood as a positive aspect. Olga described the situation thus:

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

Diversity is seen as a feature of these places' identity; and the variety of residents' places of origin implies that they do not uniformly come from rural areas. A link is implied between the peripheral situation of *colonias* and the 'outsider' status of incoming residents, an effect of land markets (in that the cheapest, most accessible land is often found on the outskirts of the city). However, most informal settlement residents do not come directly from their place of origin, but have usually rented elsewhere in the city for a period prior to settling and building. Although Xalapa's population increase in the 1980s and 1990s included large numbers of 'rural refugees of economic reform' (Meyers 2003: 77), the years that incomers spend renting in central locations mean that *colonias* are likely to be 'urban phenomena resulting from sophisticated urban decisions made by long-time urban residents ... following no rural pattern' (Mangin 1967: 82).

It is certainly true that much of the city's informal development has taken place on formerly agricultural land (Villanueva Olmeda 2002). *Colonia* residents tended to relate this characterisation to the semi-rural nature of their neighbourhoods, rather than the cultural character of the people, with reference to the material setting of these places (see Photo 6.6). In this sense, 'rural' may have a positive inference of tranquillity, in contrast to the 'disorderly', more densely populated and possibly more 'urban' places. But the accuracy of the 'rural' label relating to cultural or social aspects of these places is questionable.

Photo 6.6: Resident working land in Loma Bonita (solicited photo, Sandra)

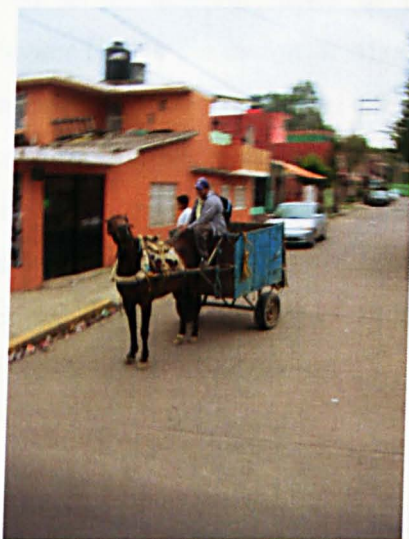


Furthermore, rural-urban migration has a generational component, meaning that migrants who arrived in the 1980s by now have children of their own, who have grown up in Xalapa. These second-generation incomers often go on to settle in newer *colonias*, as described by Alejandra, who lives and works in *colonias* around Xalapa:

'What happens is that many of the people who live there are fragmented families [desdoblamientos] from this part of the city. They're the daughters, sons of people who live closer to Xalapa' (Alejandra 07.03.07).

This multi-layered diversity is often overlooked in general and local discourses on informal settlements, in favour of a less nuanced view of a 'rural culture' in an urban setting. In particular, deeming a place 'rural' is one of the most explicit ways in which to construct it as separate from the 'urban', and hence the city. On the other hand, diversity is often seen as a key element of city living, which underlies the city's potential as a collective resource (Healey 2002). In this sense, the observed social diversity that *colonias* contain could be seen as an asset; and furthermore, it is testament to their urban nature, and hence to their place in the city. In fact, as the centre for regional agricultural production, Xalapa contains mixed and entangled elements of 'rural' and 'urban', even in central areas (see Photo 6.7).

Photo 6.7: Horse and cart in central area of Xalapa (Mauro Castro)



This section has explored ideas about disorder that seem to pervade local discursive constructions of *colonias populares*. These places' apparent 'autonomy' derives from their perceived rural nature, and results in a 'disorderly culture'. However, as Shields (1991) has pointed out, 'culture' can be a pretext for marginalisation, as places are ranked in cultural systems of space, meaning that certain places (and cultures) are perceived as peripheral. In my research, such perceptions seemed to contain moral overtones, based on norms and ideals such as cleanliness and order, although residents' perspectives revealed 'disorderly' circumstances as constraints rather than cultural preferences. Moreover, as Mooney (1999) has noted, there is often no clear demarcation of order and disorder, and the city centre may be as disorderly as the peripheral areas, as suggested by news reports in Xalapa. Here, the 'rural' label seems to be a way of isolating and othering *colonias populares*. Local discourses appear to conflate spatial with cultural aspects, whereby areas with 'rural' attributes are seen as backwards '*ranchos*', belying their complexity as places in the city. The final section of this chapter examines an aspect of these places which is seen as an essential prerequisite for their incorporation into the city: self-organisation, which has implications for political relations and processes in *colonias populares*.

6.4 Self-organisation

Self-organisation is perceived as an inherent factor in the development of *colonias populares*, as outlined in Chapter Four's discussion of Mexico's changing urban context. This is because collective organisation is often critical for processes of land acquisition, settlement, petitioning for services and undertaking neighbourhood improvements. Such activities are often targeted at administrative structures, particularly municipal authorities; but they may also be directed at, or receive support from, other political actors and entities. Here, the discussion is structured around three themes which arose during the research: 'limbo' status; tolerance; and self-help and manipulation.

'Limbo' status

One of the main motives for resident self-organisation is lack of basic services, deriving from the unserved nature of the cheap and often peripheral land on which *colonias* develop. While residents organise to request services from the local municipality, such neighbourhoods' location often means their status in terms of administrative responsibility is uncertain, as alluded to in earlier sections. Situated on the 'peri-urban' city periphery, *colonias populares* are perceived as neither rural nor urban. This is especially relevant in the case of Loma Bonita, whose situation was highlighted by *ejidatarios* from the Ejido Chiltoyac:

'Loma Bonita isn't recognised as a neighbourhood of Xalapa, nor ... a community of [Ejido] Chiltoyac. So it's on neither one side nor the other. Why? Well, partly because it doesn't suit the Municipality, primarily because of services. When a real neighbourhood starts, it needs services, water, sewerage, electricity, schools, hospitals, pavements, roads. So because of this, it doesn't suit the Municipality to recognise it as a neighbourhood. Why? Because then [the neighbourhood's] going to go asking for – more than asking for, demanding – services, but as the Municipality doesn't have many economic resources, it won't be able to afford to grant the necessary services' (Martin and Eduardo 10.05.07).

This response highlights the importance of boundaries, and the peripheral position supposedly occupied by *colonias populares*, politically and administratively as well as spatially. The contrast this respondent makes between *colonias* and 'real neighbourhoods' is particularly telling: the latter seems to refer to 'legitimate' formal private or state-subsidised settlements, whereas *colonias populares* are 'unrecognised' and illegitimate. On the other hand, the political motives behind this, which the respondent also refers to, relate to resource management at the local level. In Loma Bonita's case, its position between rural and urban spheres affects the *colonia's* capacity as political agent, as regularisation is dependent on the federal government's volition.

This 'limbo' status reflects the nature of the regularisation process, which is also determined by political factors at the national level. It has been argued that the informal,

unregulated *ejidal* land market is effectively sanctioned by the Mexican Government through its role in formalising land titles through expropriation (Azuela and Duhau 1998). Some have criticised this as revealing the government's passive attitude towards informal development, faced with a powerful agricultural lobby which retains influence in spite of reforms (Jones and Ward 1998). An example of this can be seen in the fact that residents of neighbourhoods developed from *ejidos* often pay twice for their land, as mentioned in Chapter Four. Joaquin, from the Municipal Office of Citizen Participation, highlighted this issue:

'If you acquired a plot of land here, the problem is that if you're sold it for 40,000 pesos⁵⁵ for example ... CORETT expropriates, and they resell it to you. ... [Residents] pay twice – they pay twice – incredible that they pay twice and they live in the most marginalised places. Because the ejidatario makes his good deal, or the intermediary, "the coyote" as he's called, but CORETT pays the ejidatarios again, for permission to expropriate. So CORETT logically has to charge each [resident]' (Joaquin 26.02.07).

Regularisation therefore draws attention to one of the paradoxical elements of urban informal settlements: the poor often pay more for services and land (Neuwirth 2005: 81; Davis 2006: 144). Moreover, this response concurs with predictions that the 1992 reforms to the *ejidal* land market were likely to benefit intermediaries, due to the increased complexities of an already ambiguous legal framework (e.g. Austin 1994; Jones and Ward 1998); and it indicates that political interests may shape such processes, even within structures apparently designed to assist the poor.

Within the informal land market, then, *ejidatarios* and intermediaries make a profit at the expense of residents, not to mention the authorities. The above respondent also made the point that these intermediaries are often involved later, in a 'political' capacity:

'The ejidatarios, or their intermediaries, they make good deal, they line their pockets, and then later on the same people are at the head of groups requesting, demanding, public services' (Joaquin 26.02.07).

⁵⁵ About £2,000 at the time of the research.

This situation is again created by the political character of the regularisation process, which prioritises other interests above those of marginalised urban residents, seen for example in the prolonging of their pre-regularisation 'limbo' status for political reasons (e.g. Meyers 2003). However, Mexico's regularisation programme is often seen as progressive, relating to the characterisation of 'tolerant' official attitudes towards *colonias populares*.

Tolerance

The attitude of local authorities towards specific neighbourhoods can have positive or negative effects for residents, and for the development of these places. As mentioned in Chapters Two and Three, relations with the authorities have particular significance for marginalised urban residents, not least because, as Friedmann (2007: 260) puts it, 'the state' controls the regulatory setting in which places are made (although place-making may occur on the margins of regulations). The Mexican state is generally perceived as pursuing a policy of tolerance towards *colonias populares* (outlined in more detail in Chapter Four), and my research revealed that residents of the case study neighbourhoods had rarely experienced threats of eviction from local authorities. On the other hand, some residents suggested that tolerant official attitudes were dependent on a neighbourhood's alignment with the agenda of the local administration at the time. Research also revealed some anecdotal evidence of evictions from other areas of Xalapa; one resident of Moctezuma described how she had come to take possession of her plot there as compensation for being evicted from another area (although the local government did not appear to have been directly responsible for the eviction) (Magdalena 14.02.07).

On the other hand, in Mexico since the 1990s, observers have noted a trend in local authorities starting to enforce land transaction regulations which may have gone unheeded for years (Jones and Ward 1998). In the case of Xalapa, one respondent from the Office of Urban Development was keen to point out that the Municipal Government had recently started to employ sanctions against illegal subdivision more rigorously: over the past three years, the Office had pressed charges in 40 out of 101 cases of illegal subdivision (Wanda 21.02.07). The case of fraudulent land sale in Loma Bonita, which led to the imprisonment

of a community leader (described in Chapter Four), could be taken as evidence of this. Additionally, at least two other accounts of settlers being imprisoned relating to land sale fraud were related to me, and news reports mentioned similar events (e.g. Yonca González 2007). It may be that former tacit policies of tolerance of informal settlement in low-value peripheral areas of the city are being superseded by a policy of control, as land becomes more scarce (Meyers 2003).

More generally, however, the prevailing local government attitude towards *colonias populares* in Xalapa seems to have been one of benign acceptance, and even tacit support. Relating to the case study neighbourhoods, certain factors may have influenced this. Moctezuma's origins on land granted by the State has safeguarded residents from the threat of eviction, although it may also have resulted in increased political manipulation. In Loma Bonita, the neighbourhood's isolated and remote position on relatively low-value land means that respondents complain of being 'forgotten', but they are also relatively free from excessive interference. Certainly, residents of *colonias populares* in Mexico appear to have more to fear from manipulation by agents of the state than from eviction or displacement.

On the other hand, a tolerant or benign attitude may mask some of the more subtle and complex political relations and practices that contribute to the construction of these places. *Colonias populares* are discursively constructed in certain ways, shaping attitudes towards them, which have the potential to become institutionalised, or reified in policy. This can be seen in Xalapa's Citizen Participation policy, which appropriates pre-existing patterns of self-organisation (Jiminez 1988), obliging residents to organise collectively to obtain basic services. This policy and related issues are discussed at length in Chapter Seven. Furthermore, lack of interference or a tolerant official attitude does not equate to support, and indeed, being left alone is a risky strategy: staying on the margins of official visibility keeps costs low and allows room for semi-legal activities, but may impede access to welfare benefits and services.

The situation regarding the political context of *colonias populares* in Mexico is complicated by the complex structure of government. The three-tier system of government

(outlined in Chapter Four) means that understanding the complicated relations between the authorities and residents of *colonias populares* depends to an extent on which level of government is involved. It also means that the view from the local (municipal) level may be quite different from the state (regional) and federal level. Given that Mexico has three main political parties, there is potential for each level of government to be controlled by a different political party in the setting of any given urban area. Joaquin highlighted some of the problems related to the complexity of multi-level government in Mexico:

'It's cost the Republic many millions of pesos, many millions of dollars, because of this lack of coordination – which is [what is] needed if we want to modernise the public profession, public services' (Joaquin 26.02.07).

As Jones and Ward (1998) have pointed out, the three-year term for municipal administration in the context of an enduring corporatist political culture means that local government often lacks consistency or expertise, which, combined with a lack of resources, leaves it weak and open to corruption. On the other hand, this can be exploited by marginalised residents who have the political know-how to do so: for example, in Moctezuma, the residents' petition for piped water was taken to the Municipal Government, then the State Government, and was finally resolved by the State Water Commission (CAEV). This could be seen as an example of 'soft subversion' through the 'fragmented state' (Sharp et al. 2002: 22-3); although as others have noted, fragmentation can also be a strategy for centralised control of power (Guarneros-Meza 2009).

One way to understand *colonias populares* and the complex political relations that influence them may be as 'entanglements of power' (Sharp et al. 2000), as suggested in Chapter Three. This enables a view of 'the state' not as one cohesive entity, but rather as multiple and varied embodiments of fluctuating power, entailing instances of both domination and resistance, an argument which is developed further in the next chapter's discussion of local policy. In the context of *colonias populares*, this corresponds not only to the three tiers of government in Mexico, but also to individual agents of the state, as well as 'unofficial' political actors, such as self-appointed community leaders. This complexity of relations also calls to mind Corbridge et al.'s (2005) assertion that the marginalised may

'see the state' in a variety of different ways, not just through official channels, but in the interstices and contradictions of its multiple functions. How different agents of the state discursively construct *colonias populares* affects how these places are conceptualised in policy, which may have material results for residents, and for their relations with the rest of the city. The politicised nature of these relations also relates to their conceptualisation as 'self-help' in local discourses, and their manipulation for certain ends.

Self-help and manipulation

Ideas about self-help accompany the somewhat idealised vision of a 'tolerant state': a benign attitude from local government implies that residents are free to get on with organising themselves. Given widespread suspicion in Mexico about vote buying through welfare policies, self-help seems to be portrayed as an appropriate policy for a democratic, autonomous local authority to support. In the context of *colonias populares*, this attitude can be detected in the tension between local government rhetoric about the need for residents to engage in processes of self-help, and the continuing reality of political manipulation of low-income residents, through processes of patronage and clientelism.

At the level of State Government, Julio, a senior civil servant in the State Heritage Department, located responsibility for the development of Moctezuma with the residents:

'The State simply granted the land. It left it urbanised, and in coordination with the municipalities, the introduction of basic public services was started – water, drainage, sewer system, public lighting. But at the same time, with the participation of the colonia's residents, because ... they also regulate their own needs. No-one knows his own needs better than himself. ... [The State] left [the colonia] divided into lots, delimiting which are the green areas, which are the areas for community facilities, where you establish – or where will be encouraged in the future – hospitals, medical centres, schools, churches, parks, gardens' (Julio 02.03.07).

As well as putting a positive angle on the apparently streamlined process of land acquisition, 'urbanisation' and service provision, this response also places the onus firmly on the residents for development processes. It emphasises their capability, as well as their

expertise, similar to self-help approaches which laud the constructive capacity of residents unfettered by regulations (e.g. Turner 1972; De Soto 2000). High levels of resident participation (for example in service provision) also imply lower levels of government intervention, and a concomitant shifting of responsibility for development away from the authorities and towards the residents, perhaps reflecting the effects of Mexico's 'neoliberalisation' at local level. In the above response, the rhetoric of participation and 'knowing one's own needs' are used to justify the lack of official capacity to meet these needs, and to turn it into a positive, even empowering opportunity for residents. From a critical perspective, this could also be seen as absolving the state of its more general responsibility to meet low-income housing need (e.g. Moser and Peake 1987).

Corroborating the above view of resident participation, Joaquin, from the Municipal Office of Citizen Participation, explained why resident co-operation⁵⁶ is so important from the point of view of the Municipality:

'Look, if the public service arrives and it didn't cost you anything you don't value it, but if the service arrives and you put in your own part, you say, "It's my street, it's my water, it's my drainage, it's my kerb and pavement, it's my paving", so you value it more. And that's really very important, because if you co-operated economically, you're going to help to look after the works. If you didn't co-operate, you couldn't care less [a ti te vale]' (Joaquin 26.02.07).

This response again draws on 'heroic' interpretations of settlers' efforts. It also appeals to the idea that low-income residents should 'do their bit', seen in collaborative public works projects (involving *colonia* residents and municipal officers) elsewhere in the State of Veracruz (e.g. Milenio El Portal 2007). It can also be seen in policies which appropriate residents' 'self-help' activities in order to obtain basic services, incorporating them into a formal structure. But the above response also contains the assumption that residents cannot be trusted not to abuse facilities unless they have a financial stake in them⁵⁷.

⁵⁶ Co-operation (*cooperación*) is often used in an economic sense in this context, meaning 'to engage in economic co-operation', rather than 'to work or act together' (Collins English Dictionary 1992). See Chapter Seven for a fuller discussion of this.

⁵⁷ It is noteworthy that the respondent, a Municipal civil servant, used a rather vulgar turn of phrase: a closer translation of '*A ti te vale [madre]*' would be 'You couldn't give a shit'.

The rhetoric of self-help in this context is often accompanied by the reality of patron-client relations between residents and political actors. This can be seen in the form of promises or actual gifts, such as building materials, in exchange for votes. One resident from Loma Bonita listed the political candidates who had visited the neighbourhood during the electoral campaign period, including: Atanasio García Duran (a PRD State Congress Deputy); Daniel Chedraui (the then mayoral candidate, who became Mayor of Xalapa in January 2008); Elizabeth Morales (a PRI Federal Congress Deputy); and Ricardo Ahued (the Mayor of Xalapa at the time) (Isaac and Eliza 20.05.07). Similarly, in Moctezuma, the start of works to pave the main street, which coincided with the electoral campaign period, was publicised by a large notice at the entrance to the neighbourhood, making clear it was a project funded by the Municipality (see Photo 6.8). In the context of this perceived manipulation, several residents referred to themselves as *'gente maleada'* or 'ill-used people'. However, such political activity could also be seen as a form of recognition: in demonstrating *colonias'* political importance as constituencies, these visits reveal their inclusion in the urban political arena, suggesting they are part of the city. The issue of clientelism is discussed at length in the next chapter, with reference to the municipal policy of Citizen Participation.

Photo 6.8: Sign announcing project to pave Moctezuma's main street (Melanie Lombard)



This section has shown how self-organisation in *colonias populares* in Xalapa is inextricably linked to residents' relations with political structures and agents, which are complex and entangled. The lack of clarity over *colonias*' administrative status, resulting in their perceived 'limbo' position, may be the product of political interests involved in the regularisation process. It also reflects the normative nature of the 'rural/urban' categorisation, which appears to vary according to prevailing interests. A 'tolerant' attitude towards *colonias* on the part of the authorities may relate to their (lack of) capacity to intervene, which has fostered the rhetoric of 'self-help' as a means of development; but this continues to be accompanied by political manipulation. In this context, the recurring notion of 'citizenship' in residents' and local government narratives is significant, as it seems to embody a normative ideal. The implications of this discursive construction of self-organisation as a condition of citizenship is explored in the next chapter, which seeks to understand the reification of these ideas in local policy discourses, and the effects of this on *colonia* residents.

6.5 Conclusion

This chapter, which has explored the discursive dimension of place-making at the city level, sought to answer the research question, 'How are *colonias populares* discursively constructed in Xalapa?'. Discourses, understood as words, meanings, and images that are projected as truths about the world, have the potential for marginalising effects. Information gathered from the local context – mainly through interviews, but also from local media, official documents and observation – was examined for evidence of how *colonias populares* are portrayed and perceived as places in local discourses. In setting these perceptions alongside residents' lived experiences, it was shown that ideas about places have the potential to affect the daily lives of people who live in them. Often, *colonias* were described in negative terms. Spatially, they were seen as anarchic growth or 'nothing' places, resulting in an added burden of responsibility on local authorities. Similarly, the conflation of spatial qualities (such as greenery and distance from the city centre) with 'rural' culture meant *colonias* were perceived as backwards, 'disorderly' places, separate from the modern, 'urban' city. These portrayals of *colonias* in the local context were

experienced by residents as discriminatory treatment and stigmatisation, for example regarding provision of basic and secondary services, indicating the potential for discursive place-making to contain political and marginalising tendencies.

These discursive constructions, of ‘dysfunctional’ and ‘disorderly’ places, seem to be premised on normative views about ‘real’ neighbourhoods, and ‘how things should be’, based on certain ideals (such as citizenship). The rhetorical opposition between these (existing) places and idealised conceptions relates to the construction of *colonias populares* in local discourses according to dualistic categories: for example, good/bad, rural/urban, clean/dirty, orderly/disorderly, planned/unplanned, worthless/valuable, citizen/settler. It is this discursive construction of *colonias populares* according to certain categories that suggests the powerful effects of discourses. These discursive constructions of *colonias populares* in Xalapa are reminiscent of binary categories in academic and policy discourses, which tend to conceptualise urban informal settlements within a dualistic framework, as one half of the formal/informal, legal/illegal, or legitimate/illegitimate city (as discussed in Chapters Two and Three).

However, my research showed that these constructions are not confined to ‘official’ perspectives, or those of ‘outsiders’ to the *colonias*, but are also expressed by *colonia* residents: in distinguishing their neighbourhood from ‘other’, dangerous settlements, or to distance themselves from their modest, ‘rural’ neighbours. This suggests the complexity of influences and relations in discursive place-making – beyond the idea of a two-way relationship between a repressive, monolithic ‘state’, and a passive, homogenous ‘community’ – encompassing a complicated network of power relations contextualised within the whole city. Conversely, *colonia* residents, while experiencing discrimination, also suggested they had the capacity to resist these stereotypes and their effects, in their struggles to make a place in the city for themselves. In fact, the ‘ordinariness’ of these places (seen in residents’ aspirations and preferences, and these places’ links with the wider city) shows that although they may be discursively isolated, they are already part of the city in many ways. This reveals the limitations of existing theories, both in terms of the inadequacy of dualistic frameworks for capturing the complexity of lived experiences in

these places, as well as in terms of their potentially marginalising effects, through the reification of circulating ideas.

The questions that the discussion in this chapter has raised – about the power of discourses, power relations in the city, and the possibility of resistance to discursive constructions of place – guides the focus of the next two empirical chapters, alongside the research questions outlined in Chapter Five. Chapter Seven, ‘Entanglements of Power’, looks at how local policy constructs *colonias populares* in Xalapa, as a concrete example of discursive place-making. This also enables an exploration of how these places are situated within complex networks of power relations, with an emphasis on political elements of place-making. Chapter Eight, ‘A Place in the City’, looks at how residents may resist certain discursive constructions and their marginalising effects, through their own place-making activities, which encompass social, spatial and cultural processes (as well as political ones). An additional objective of this discussion is to emphasise the residents’ productive activities, which are often devalued or obscured in local and wider discourses, as discussed in this chapter and the next.

CHAPTER 7: ENTANGLEMENTS OF POWER: POLICY AND PLACE-MAKING IN *COLONIAS POPULARES*

The issue is less a shortage of housing than a shortage of development.
Rubén Utria *Cultural Factors of Development and the Housing Problem in Latin America* (1967 in *Xalapa Municipal Development Plan*, 2005: 43)

Introduction

Within the context of the city, urban informal settlements may be framed in particular discourses, which construct them in certain ways. One of the most important discursive arenas in the urban context is that of local policy. Policy is understood as plans, programmes, principles or a course of action, usually of a political actor such as a government, party or politician (Dean 2005). As an expression of understandings of the city, policy has the potential to shape these understandings, and hence the city itself (Cochrane 2007: 13). As the regulatory background for urban development, policy offers a snapshot of how urban government discursively constructs, and seeks to manage, particular places. Policy clearly has a political dimension, but also a discursive one: policy-making has been described as a ‘constant discursive struggle’ (Fisher and Forester 1993 in Rydin 1999: 467). As such, policy is influenced by certain dominant discourses, at the local and national level, as part of a wide range of multiple, conflicting understandings involved in policy-making. Policy may encompass powerful normative ideals, as indicated by the above quotation from Utria (1976), cited in the *Xalapa Municipal Development Plan* (GMX 2005: 43).

In the research setting, local policy offers a concrete example of discourses about *colonias* in Xalapa, and a means of understanding how the discursive constructions explored in the previous chapter may become reified. In this sense, it can be seen as a form of discursive but also political place-making. With this in mind, this chapter seeks to answer the research question, ‘How does local policy discursively construct *colonias populares*, and what are the effects of this?’. Alongside the discursive construction of *colonias populares* as ‘other’ or separate from the city, the previous chapter also suggested that local narratives point to their complexity and ordinariness as part of the city. The connections that exist between

these places and the wider city suggest that they are involved in complex and entangled power relations in the urban setting, particularly with regard to the 'political' dimension of place-making. The chapter focuses on the reification of discursive constructions of informality in policy, and residents' lived experiences of this, in the context of power. In this setting, the Xalapa Municipal Government's policy on citizen participation was selected as an example of local policy relating to *colonias populares*, for reasons outlined below.

This chapter is divided into three sections. The first section introduces the policy, focusing on the Citizen Participation Bylaw, and contextualising it. This regulation sets out a framework for citizen participation; but its idealised structure meshes with everyday place-making in *colonias*, in ways which are revealed by a comparison of the formal structure with the residents' experiences of it, outlined in the second section. Finally, alongside the prescriptions of the policy, other strategies are employed, by residents as well as by local authorities, which are indicative of power relations in and around these places. The third section therefore goes beyond Citizen Participation policy, to look at some of these 'unofficial' strategies. In support of the overall research aim to critically examine understandings of urban informal settlements through a place-making approach, the chapter concludes with reflections on the implications of these findings for theories of informality.

7.1 'Citizen Participation' as spatial policy

Citizen participation in Xalapa is primarily the responsibility of the Municipal Office of Social Management, Citizen and Resident Participation, referred to as the Office of Citizen Participation (DGPC). The Citizen Participation policy was selected as an example of local policy on the basis of initial research responses which suggested it was particularly important for *colonias populares*: the framework was repeatedly mentioned in preliminary interviews with *colonia* residents and officials. Moreover, despite some recent work on urban governance (e.g. Guarneros-Meza 2009) and previous research on citizen participation structures (e.g. Aguilar 1988; Jimenez 1988), there seems to be little current work on the implications and effects of municipal policies of citizen participation in

Mexico, particularly with regard to their 'target population'. This section outlines the policy in Xalapa, and contextualises it in terms of: its historical relation with service provision and *colonias populares*; its relation to 'urban planning', based on the Xalapa Municipal Development Plan; and its legal structure in Xalapa, relating to the Citizen Participation Bylaw there.

Citizen Participation, demand-making and service provision

The idea of participation in local affairs in Mexico is in some senses not new. As Ward (1999: 182) points out, in Mexico 'there has always been a strong tradition of community participation, albeit played out as a two-way co-optation exercise between government and local communities in which both sides have generally benefited'. Elsewhere, it has been noted that '[i]n other urban contexts, ways of motivating and involving citizens to participate in the city's development processes are sought; in [Mexico's] urban context citizens are extremely involved' (Hernández Bonilla 2005: 198). The promotion of increased formal participation has taken place in the context of a wider transition to democracy in Mexico, following 70 years of one-party rule by the PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party); although it has been less than clear what kind of democracy will result (Stolle-McAllister 2005).

'Citizen participation' is often taken to mean participation in democratic processes, such as elections (e.g. Camp 2003; Stolle-McAllister 2005). However, in Mexico, 'participation' in the urban context is also linked to service provision. This appears to originate from the development processes which *colonias populares* undergo, given their location on unserviced land. Indeed, some have observed that in this context, participation is the same as demand-making, defined as 'an activity carried out by an individual settler or group of residents aimed at obtaining a particular good from the government' (Aguilar 1988: 42). Up to the early 1970s, demand-making frequently occurred through patron-client relationships between bureaucrats or politicians and residents of *colonias populares* (Jimenez 1988: 17). The first official structures for citizen participation at neighbourhood level were introduced in Mexico City in the 1970s, although these bodies were purely consultative (Aguilar

1988). The creation of Citizens' Representative Bodies (*Organos de Representación Ciudadana*) in Mexico City in 1980 was the first attempt to establish an official channel for participation for all residents of the city, and particularly for *colonia* residents who were involved in demand-making (Jimenez 1988: 18). However, it has been argued that these bodies were created to depoliticise *colonia* residents' demand-making processes (Jimenez 1988).

Since the 1990s, moves towards decentralisation and democratisation at the local level have seen the promotion of institutional reform and participatory methods, meaning more involvement from the private and voluntary sectors in local policy-making (Guarneros-Meza 2009). In 1995, the new Constitution of Mexico established increased citizen participation in electoral processes, and introduced mechanisms necessary for referenda, along with the idea of citizen participation as a check on municipalities (Conde Bonfil 1997). More recently, as mentioned in Chapter Four, innovative forms of self-organisation for service provision, developed by urban social movements in the 1980s, have been appropriated by local governments as part of the rhetoric of democratisation. The Federal Development Programme 2000-6 suggested that 'national and local economic development should favour a multi-actor responsibility by promoting citizen participation and partnership with different sectors of society', which led to the introduction of strategies involving private-public collaboration in urban development plans, based on public and citizen participation (Guarneros-Meza 2009: 470).

Although this challenges views of 'the state' as the sole provider of services, it does not guarantee empowerment of excluded groups: despite the rhetoric of promoting pluralism in local policy-making relating to urban development and planning, in practice the social segmentation of the PRI era often prevails (Guarneros-Meza 2009). Furthermore, 'participation' frequently applies mainly to residents who live in areas which lack the services middle-income residents take for granted. Given the existing high levels of resident place-making in *colonias populares*, increased participation in the context of decentralised government has meant the institutionalisation of forms of self-organised demand-making. The establishment of a framework for 'citizen participation'

(*participación ciudadana*) at municipal level, ostensibly to provide a structure for participation in a range of municipal decision-making processes, seems to have resulted in municipal authorities seeking to manage, and even appropriate, residents' place-making processes in *colonias populares* with a focus on service provision.

In order to initiate service provision, there are various departments within the multi-level government structure that residents approach, most of which have a spatially-oriented remit. The fragmented and disparate nature of planning in Mexico means that in terms of petitioning for services, residents often have to take a multi-targeted approach. They may need to go to: CORETT⁵⁸ for regularisation; CMAS⁵⁹ for water and sewerage; CFE⁶⁰ for electricity; and the Municipal President to ask him to put pressure on all the other bodies. The Municipal Government has responsibility for spatial policy at the local level, meaning it is often residents' first port of call, although the specific department will depend on which need is considered to be most urgent. Some or all of these processes may take place via the channels established as part of the Citizen Participation framework in Xalapa. In this sense, citizen participation may be seen as a state-sponsored way of stimulating collaboration among the poorest residents in order to obtain goods and services that the state is unable or unwilling to provide spontaneously. The spatial element of citizen participation, which is central to the way the policy is framed at the local level, is evidenced by its incorporation into the city's Municipal Development Plan.

The Xalapa Municipal Development Plan

Xalapa's first Municipal Development Plan (MDP) was published in 1982, as part of the authorities' 'crisis response' to the city's rapid expansion (Meyers 2003). The three-year period of each municipal administration means that the Municipal Development Plan is renewed, and potentially changed radically, every three years. The 2005-07 Plan (GMX 2005) names as its legal antecedents the National and State Constitutions, State Planning

⁵⁸ CORETT, the Commission for the Regularisation of Land Tenure, is the federal body which regularises *ejidal* land, introduced in Chapter Four.

⁵⁹ CMAS is the Municipal Commission for Drinking Water and Drainage.

⁶⁰ CFE is the Federal Commission for Electricity.

Law, and the Municipal Institutional Law (by which the Municipality is constituted). In keeping with the federal system of government, it must also be formulated in accordance with Mexico's National Development Plan, and the Veracruz State Development Plan.

Table 7.1: Framework of responsibility for the Xalapa Municipal Development Plan

Development Coordination Unit		
Local Economic Development	Urban and Environmental Development	Social and Human Development
Municipal Office of Business, Supplies and Rural Development	Municipal Office of Urban Development Municipal Office of Public Works Municipal Office of the Environment Municipal Office of Public Lighting Municipal Office of Public Sanitation	Office of the Municipal System for Integrated Family Development (DIF) Municipal Office of Health Municipal Office for the Promotion of Education, Health and Sport <u>Municipal Office of Social Management, Citizen and Resident Participation</u>

Also included in the structure are: the autonomous Municipal Offices of Civil Protection, Informatics, Regulatory Supervision and Municipal Highways; the Offices of Internal Audit, Civil Registry and Judicial Matters; and the Municipal Commission for Drinking Water and Drainage (CMAS).

Source: GMX 2005

The Xalapa Municipal Development Plan is based on the requests, needs, proposals and aspirations of the municipality's inhabitants, collected during electoral campaigning and thus reflecting the government's mandate from its citizens (GMX 2005). It states:

'This Development Plan will be at all times a bridge between the necessities of the population and the actions which this Municipal Council will initiate with the aim of achieving the integrated and sustainable development of the municipality of Xalapa' (GMX 2005: 1)⁶¹.

The Plan was passed by the Municipal Council in Cabinet session, indicating it is the responsibility of the entire Municipality, with responsibility for its implementation shared

⁶¹ All translations of official documents are by the author.

across numerous Municipal Offices. It is divided into three headings, overseen by the Development Coordination Unit: Local Economic Development; Urban and Environmental Development; and Social and Human Development. This complex three-pronged planning structure and its corresponding framework are shown in Table 7.1, along with additional relevant Offices.

Of the departments included in the planning structure, several are particularly important for residents of *colonias populares* in terms of consolidation processes, including: the Office of Urban Development; the Office of Public Works; CMAS; and the Office of Social Management, Citizen and Resident Participation (DGPC). Despite apparently being the lead department responsible for implementing the MDP in *de jure* terms, and hence having a key role in 'planning', the influence exercised by the Office of Urban Development is somewhat limited in *de facto* terms. For instance, although there is a legal requirement for construction permits in *colonias* according to the Urban Development Bylaw (DGDU 2004), whether this is fulfilled in practice depends on factors such as: the household's economic situation; whether 'permanent' materials are being used; and the resident's (actual or apparent) ignorance of these laws. In neighbourhoods built on *ejidal* land, Urban Development's influence is often limited to producing feasibility reports for the regularising body, CORETT.

In fact, it is the DGPC, underlined in the table, which seems to have greatest influence in *colonias populares*. The DGPC's remit in Xalapa has been described as 'recognising the formation of residents' committees and encouraging their participation (organisational and financial) to carry out different actions of the municipal administration' (Contreras Rojas 2006: 78). Its influence in these areas is in large part based on the framework outlined in the Citizen Participation Bylaw (DGPC 2004), which gives some indication of how the Municipal Government discursively constructs the places and populations that this policy is aimed at.

The Citizen Participation Bylaw

The Citizen Participation Bylaw is the primary piece of local legislation setting out the regulations governing citizen participation in Xalapa. Its stated aim is to sustain municipal development with the participation of citizens, based on the concept of 'co-responsibility' between residents and the municipal authorities, and an idea of citizenship encompassing both rights and obligations (DGPC 2004). Co-responsibility is defined as 'the shared obligation of citizens and government to comply with mutually agreed decisions; recognising and guaranteeing the rights of inhabitants to propose and decide about public affairs' (DGPC 2004, Article 2). This recalls the Federal Development Programme's recommendation for multi-actor responsibility at the municipal level, mentioned above.

Citizen participation in Xalapa is overseen by the Municipal Development Board, the instrument of planning and monitoring for apportioning resources from the Municipal Social Infrastructure Fund, known as '*Ramo 33*' or 'Branch 33' (DGPC 2004). As mentioned in Chapter Four, this funding stream was created in 1997 to decentralise poverty-alleviation funding from central government to state and municipal levels, and represents the main source of official funding for infrastructure and services in *colonias populares*. This reinforces the point made above, that the target population of the citizen participation policy seems to be almost exclusively residents of *colonias populares*, in Xalapa as elsewhere (e.g. Aguilar 1988; Jimenez 1988; Guarneros-Meza 2009). Some of the implications of this are explored below.

Making citizens

The Citizen Participation Bylaw sets out definitions of citizenship according to residential status in Xalapa. Inhabitants (*habitantes*) are people born in the municipality with permanent residence there, while residents (*vecinos*) are people who have lived in the municipality for at least one year, who must also register themselves on the census and land registry within a period of three months. Temporary residents (*transeúntes*) are those who pass through the municipality without habitually residing there, who are also subject to municipal legislation. There is also a special category of residence (*domicilio*), as opposed

to residential status (*vecindad*) in the municipality, for public servants, soldiers in active service, students, prisoners and defendants sentenced to prison.

During my research, several residents of *colonias populares* proudly used the language of this framework to describe themselves as having achieved 'residency' in Xalapa after arriving from outside the city. However, the fact of not being born in Xalapa suggests they will never be eligible for full 'inhabitant' status; this is particularly relevant in the *colonias*, which are often populated by residents who are seen as 'outsiders', as shown in the previous chapter. In this way, a hierarchy of citizens is set up by the Citizen Participation Bylaw. The social implications of this are suggested in a comment made by Federico, a community leader in Moctezuma, who observed:

'We use categories, we say there are first-class and second-class citizens, but not because others see us like that – often it's because the same person mentally classifies himself like that' (Federico 15.02.07).

Earlier on in the same interview, Federico referred to the difference between 'citizens' (*ciudadanos*) and 'settlers' (*colonos*), which recalls Chatterjee's (2004) conception of two classes of urban dwellers. These comments suggest the internalisation of this hierarchy of citizenship by residents of *colonias populares*, bringing to mind Cameron and Gibson's (2005) assertion that lack of recognition at societal level can lead people to devalue themselves, suggesting the powerful material and social effects of discursive marginalisation.

Rights and obligations

Citizens' rights and obligations are also set out in the Citizen Participation Bylaw, with notably more obligations (16) than rights (three). Particularly interesting is the diverse and somewhat random nature of responsibilities, which relate to different categories, scales and frameworks. For example, residents are exhorted to 'use the land according to the norms established in the Municipal Development Plan, and in accordance with the general interest' (DGPC 2004, Article 17), an admonition which falls under the category of land use and applies at the municipal scale. In keeping with this are requirements apparently

aimed at the individual or household scale, such as fencing off empty land on individual properties, painting the façades of buildings at least once a year, and ensuring that a plaque with the official, municipally-assigned house number is visible on the house. This is suggestive of the state's project of 'the administrative ordering of nature and society', to create the legibility of a society (Scott 1998: 4-5).

Photo 7.1: Faena to clean streets in Moctezuma (Melanie Lombard)



These requirements have a strong environmental element, also evident in the responsibilities to report theft of street furniture, refrain from disposing of waste irresponsibly (see Photo 7.1), and conserve greenery. This theme, and the level of detail it contains (such as specifying the time period within which houses must be painted), contrasts with the more generic obligation to 'promote within the population the conservation and enrichment of the historic, cultural and artistic heritage of the municipality' (DGPC 2004, Article 17). There are also exhortations for citizens to vaccinate domestic animals, carry out emission checks on motorised vehicles, and most obscurely of all, 'to observe, in all of their acts, respect for human dignity and good manners' (DGPC 2004, Article 17). Despite the highly prescriptive level of detail relating to responsibilities, 'rights' are restricted to: the right of consultation about the execution of public works; the right of complaint to the municipal authorities about the existence of annoying, insalubrious, dangerous or harmful activities; and the right of association, with existing organised groups in the municipality relating to voluntary work (*servicio social*),

citizen participation or other collective benefit. Any other rights are assumed to be covered by the State and Federal Political Constitution, and other applicable laws (DGPC 2004, Article 17).

The Bylaw is therefore a way of managing the urban environment and its residents which seems to have particular relevance for residents of *colonias populares*. Moreover, it is also about the reproduction of certain values. 'Development' as it is conceptualised in the Bylaw is not just about the delivery of social goods or infrastructure; rather, it seems to presuppose an ethical norm, relating to the capture of those being 'developed' into a certain normative conception of the good citizen (Chipkin 2003). Citizenship, rather than being a given status, may be a performative act through which urban actors attain legitimacy (Lepofsky and Fraser 2002). For example, the 'citizen' imagined in the Bylaw has certain ideal qualities, such as 'dignity' and 'good manners', which bring to mind Wanda's call for 'education' to address residents' problematic 'autonomy' discussed in the previous chapter. Indeed, the prescriptive tone of the Bylaw (inadvertently) constructs its target population as lacking these qualities of citizenship, thus further separating them from the 'civilised', 'orderly' city. Chatterjee (2004: 69) points out that 'rights' belong to those who have the proper legal title (i.e. citizens); however, those without 'rights' may still have entitlements, not to compensation but assistance. The 'rights' in the Bylaw could be seen as a concession to *colonia* residents who are in the process of becoming citizens, given their 'limbo status' in terms of categories such as rural/urban. The effects of the Citizen Participation Bylaw, as a form of place-making, are to construct *colonias populares* to reflect ideological expectations about behaviour, which in turn construct and maintain ideological values (Cresswell 1996).

This section has introduced the policy of Citizen Participation in Xalapa, influenced by national discourses of democratisation and decentralisation which interpret 'participation' as demand-making, based on existing processes of self-organisation. This could be seen as the appropriation of residents' place-making practices by the authorities. In the case of Xalapa, citizen participation has a spatial element which is somewhat at odds with its

normative discursive construction of residents: but the powerful effects of these discourses should not be underestimated. However, ‘participation’ may be conceived differently by the governed – who see it as a practice of democracy – and those who govern, who see it as a category of governance (Chatterjee 2004). The next section further explores this, looking at how the Municipality’s conception of participation interacts with the activities and perceptions of *colonia* residents, and the material consequences this has for them.

7.2 Citizen Participation in *colonias populares* in Xalapa

This section presents the main formal structures which make up the framework for citizen participation in Xalapa, as set out in the Citizen Participation Bylaw, and compares these with residents’ experiences of place-making within this framework. In this way, it examines the effects of the policy’s discursive construction of the places it seeks to manage, which could also be seen as a form of place-making. Within the Citizen Participation framework, there are two citizen-led bodies in which residents can participate: *patronatos*⁶² or residents’ boards; and works committees, which have a financial role in public works projects. A third participatory channel is the figure of Block Leader or *Jefe de Manzana*, who supposedly acts as an organisational link between citizens and municipal authorities (DGPC 2004). This section explores these three channels of citizen participation in *colonias populares*.

Citizen Participation I: *Patronatos*

The *patronato* is essentially a residents’ board or committee, formed by a President, Secretary, Treasurer and two Spokespersons. According to the Bylaw, ‘*Patronatos* are permanent bodies of citizen representation’ (DGPC 2004, Article 32), and their principal function is to establish a relationship between citizenship and government, for the formulation and administration of citizen demands and proposals. They can be formed at the scale of streets, neighbourhoods, rural areas and housing estates, at the request of

⁶² The word *patronato* is somewhat archaic, and does not appear to be used widely in this context outside Xalapa. It is kept in the original Spanish here for lack of an appropriate translation.

residents. Members must be a resident of the municipality, have lived in the corresponding area for at least one year, be of age and in full exercise of their rights, and be 'an honest and participatory person' (DGPC 2004, Article 34). Again, this language invokes the 'ideal citizen'.

Patronatos are supposed to disseminate information on their activities and decisions at Residents' Assemblies⁶³, at least twice a year. The DGPC maintains a register of all *patronatos*, and is supposed to support them with monitoring, capacity-building and facilitation. They are meant to represent the interests of the residents of the area, through the collection, promotion and administration of demands and proposals. They are also supposed to develop activities aimed at informing, training and civic education; validate the appointment of citizen representatives to the Municipal Development Board; and act as a point of liaison with the municipal authorities in case of emergency. According to the Bylaw, then, the *patronato's* role is primarily as a channel of communication and consultation between the Municipal Government and residents.

How residents see patronatos

The implied assumption in the Bylaw is that *patronatos* will be formed on the basis of residents' needs: as Guarneros-Meza (2009) points out, this tends to relate to areas where full service provision is lacking, i.e. *colonias populares*. On this basis, *colonia* residents are essentially responsible for instigating, executing and realising service provision in their neighbourhoods, as part of processes of 'consolidation'. Sebastian, a community leader in Moctezuma, explained the attitude expressed by officials from the State Government, once land had been granted to residents:

'What [the officials] were saying was, "You've got your land now, you can go and live there". ... They live in a residential area, and when they arrive there they've already got all the services. We didn't have any of these type of services' (Sebastian 23.02.07).

⁶³ A Residents' Assembly is a regular meeting of all residents from a particular street or block (OCP 2004).

This response implies a difference between ‘residential areas’ (developed privately or with state subsidies) and *colonias populares*, not just on the basis of infrastructure, but also based on residents’ experiences of place-making. It seems that as part of the institutionalisation of existing forms of self-organisation, the authorities put pressure on certain residents to ‘participate’ according to determined processes. This can be seen in specific additional regulations imposed by the authorities, such as the State Heritage Department’s insistence that landowners occupy their plots in Moctezuma within three months, or risk losing them.

In practical terms, *colonia* residents’ participation through the *patronato* may include putting together a proposal for service provision, facilitating the works, supervising the project, and contributing some or all of the cost of the labour. Gracia, from Moctezuma, commented:

‘That’s how the patronatos work: you have to keep an eye on things, go around checking up on how the work is progressing, whether they’ve authorised it or not. And when it’s authorised you have to check when they’re going to send the material, yes? I mean, it’s circles, you end up going round in [son vueltas, que tiene uno que andar dando]’ (Gracia 14.02.07).

The phrase used here, ‘*dar vueltas*’, literally translating as ‘giving turns’, has many meanings in Mexican Spanish, mostly relating to spending or passing time. It was also used by Sebastian to describe petitioning local authorities:

‘You bring a document requesting, for example, public transport, and they tell you, “Yes”. They file it and they forget about it and it stays there, so you have to go again and, you know, they’ve got you going round in circles [te tienen dando vueltas]’ (Sebastian 23.02.07).

This language was also used in a local news report about *colonia* residents who had been promised support from the Municipal Government which had failed to materialise: it was reported that for five weeks, a group of residents had ‘ceaselessly visited’ the Municipal Offices (*‘no ha dejado de dar vueltas al ayuntamiento’*), without results (Rojas 2007a).

The use of this turn of expression implies that '*vueltas*' are a consequence of the rules set by the local authorities to determine residents' self-organisation. Although the objective of the Citizen Participation framework is to facilitate residents' demands, the implied element of 'timewasting', suggesting inefficiency, may be an unintended consequence of bureaucracy. It also indicates a breakdown in participatory expectations and roles: it seems that while residents fulfil their role, this is not always reciprocated by the authorities. On the other hand, it could be argued that excessive bureaucracy is a means of delaying services, in order to manage demand and limited resources. As Ward (1999: 186) puts it:

'In terms of local authorities managing recalcitrant colonias in Mexico, Machiavelli's *Prince* is alive and well. ... In this sense it is the government which sets the rules [for demand-making], and increasingly such rules privilege law-abiding, participative, quiescent, and sometimes electorally supportive settlements which "deal" on an individual basis'.

This suggests that the Citizen Participation framework's management of *colonias populares* is as much about maintaining control and stability as it is about efficient facilitation of service provision.

Despite *patronatos* being defined as permanent bodies of representation, my research revealed that they appeared to be active only when a particular works project was underway. The works-related, *ad hoc* nature of *patronatos* suits the authorities: if committees are set up on an issue-by-issue basis, there is no consistent or continuous representation of the interests of the whole neighbourhood. However, *patronatos* often seemed to be convened with little attention to procedure. For example, despite the 'no re-election' rule, the same representatives are repeatedly re-elected; or when new ones are elected, the new president of the *patronato* simply defers to the authority of the former, continually consulting him or her (Olga 05.02.07). It may be that ignoring the rules of the policy is a strategy on the part of residents, as *ad hoc* committees inhibit neighbourhood-wide representation; although it may also be premised on residents misunderstanding how *patronatos* operate, perhaps due to the inconsistent application of the policy.

The somewhat fragmented nature of Citizen Participation, with different areas within the same neighbourhood having their own groups, may lead to tension and rivalry between residents in larger *colonias* where several *patronatos* are operating. This can also occur between adjacent neighbourhoods, as in the case of Loma Bonita, where conflict had arisen between the residents there and those of Ignacio Zaragoza, an adjoining settlement. The bad feeling between the two groups of residents was evident in comments that Camelia, a founding resident of Loma Bonita, made to me:

'They [residents of Ignacio Zaragoza] don't contribute at all. ... That's why we can't unite with them, because they're really lazy, they're moaners, they don't want to contribute to get services' (Camelia 16.03.07).

This bad feeling seemed to arise from rivalry over the primary school, which had been moved from Loma Bonita to Ignacio Zaragoza following official approval of an application from the latter neighbourhood before that of the Loma Bonita residents (an issue which is further discussed in Chapter Eight). While this may have been on the grounds of 'first come first served', the fact that the existing local primary school is now in a poorly-constructed converted house in Ignacio Zaragoza, as opposed to the relatively new official building in Loma Bonita (as seen in Photo 4.18) indicates that the decision was influenced by other factors. Loma Bonita residents speculate that bribery was involved, but the element of 'divide and rule' that Ward (1999) refers to may also have been involved here, as a local government strategy.

Citizen Participation II: Works Committees

The second channel for participation, works committees, have a confusingly similar structure to *patronatos*. Their specific remit is financial: under the requirements of the 'Branch 33' funding stream, they are constituted in every street where public works have been approved, with the character of social auditor (DGPC 2004, Article 44). In other words, they exist to control and monitor the financial dimension of public works projects at the neighbourhood level. Works committees are supposed to be formed on an *ad hoc* basis for every approved project being carried out in an area, and to last for its duration. In

auditing works on behalf of the community, they carry out tasks such as inspection, control and monitoring through documentation (e.g. signing certificates of delivery-receipt) (DGPC 2004, Article 44).

Similar to the *patronato*, they have an executive comprising with a President, Secretary, Treasurer and Spokesperson, accountable to residents' meetings, but also to the Municipal Development Board and the Municipal Council, due to the committees' financial role (DGPC 2004). As well as promoting participation among residents, and summoning the community to assist in the development and execution of works, services or activities, they exist to 'request the economic co-operation of the residents ... for carrying out public works of collective benefit, in accordance with the requirements of the laws, regulations and decisions of the Municipal Development Board' (DGPC 2004, Article 48). They are also responsible for depositing residents' contributions in the Municipal Treasury.

Photo 7.2: Faena in Las Guarniciones, adjacent to Loma Bonita (solicited photo, Brenda)



How residents see works committees

Residents seemed to perceive works committees as identical to *patronatos*, using the terms interchangeably, despite the important difference in the two bodies' functions relating to organisational participation (via *patronatos*) and financial participation (via works committees). The element of 'economic co-operation' in the Bylaw was explained by Gracia, in the context of the construction of pavements in her street in Moctezuma:

'We had to be there, and ... pay the builders, because the Municipality put in the material, but we had to pay ... the whole cost of the labour. They gave us the material, but we were [responsible for] the labour ... 80 per cent was the material and 20 per cent we put in ourselves, in labour [costs]' (Gracia 14.02.07).

The individual cost of the work per household is dependent on the width of the façade of each house, which determined the amount of paving needed for that part of the street. In this case, most houses were eight metres wide and the cost was 600 pesos⁶⁴ five years previously, although this respondent mentioned that at the time of the research, residents were having to pay double this.

Although the idea of economic 'co-operation' is central for works committees, residents who cannot afford to contribute economically can offer labour instead, on the basis of a *faena* or collective work group (see Photo 7.2). However, most residents understand co-operation in its economic sense, as the following exchange from an interview with Pedro and Lucia, two residents of Loma Bonita, illustrates:

ML: Regarding services, what's happening with electricity, the situation with electricity now?

Pedro: ... For electricity to be installed we have to co-operate. And it's 800 pesos⁶⁵ per person I think, right?

Lucia: They said 800 pesos but it's more, because first they've got to buy the poles, then they've got to, I don't know.

Pedro: Well it's still that, 800 pesos, because that's what Don Benedicto [President of the patronato] told me (Pedro and Lucia 22.03.07).

Prioritising the financial dimension of participation may mean that other forms are not valued as much, including organisational participation, and participation in democratic decision-making. However, it is interesting to note that the DGPC does not have any specific powers, but rather acts as facilitator for residents' requests (Joaquin 26.02.07). For

⁶⁴ Around £30 at the time of the research.

⁶⁵ Around £40 at the time of the research.

example, in the case of connecting neighbourhoods to water or electricity networks, it acts as intermediary between citizens and the responsible branch of government (such as CMAS or CFE). 'Branch 33' funding for specific projects is overseen by the Municipal Development Board, with the relevant individual departments. In this sense, Citizen Participation is a way of managing residents' expectations and demands, and legitimising the inability or unwillingness of the authorities to provide infrastructure. In particular, the role of leadership is pivotal to relations between *colonia* residents and local authorities.

Citizen Participation III: Block Leader (*Jefe de Manzana*)

The third channel of participation set out in the Bylaw is the Block Leader (*Jefe de Manzana*), defined as being an 'assistant of the Municipal Council' (DGPC 2004, Article 23). The requirements for Block Leaders are: having residence in the block; having an 'honest way of life'; knowing how to read and write; and not having a criminal record (DGPC 2004, Article 23). The Block Leader is identified by an official sign on his or her property.

How residents see Block Leaders

Colonia residents see the Block Leader as the officially recognised community leader within the Citizen Participation structure. The Block Leader role is supposedly distinct from that of President of the *patronato*: for example, in Loma Bonita, Don Carlos was the Block Leader, while Don Benedicto was the President of the *patronato*. However, it seems that frequently, the same person ends up doing both jobs. This was the case with Federico from Moctezuma, who was already the elected President of the *patronato* in his street:

ML: How is the Block Leader chosen?

Federico: In a democratic way too ... by means of the Residents' Assembly where patronatos and Block Leaders are elected. And coincidentally, I was chosen again (Federico 15.02.07).

Again, the stipulations of the policy seem to be flexibly interpreted, perhaps on practical grounds (especially in neighbourhoods where there are fewer residents). In practice, the

Block Leader usually represents one street, which may be for pragmatic, but also political reasons, on the basis of political affiliation at the point of land acquisition, discussed in the next chapter.

The Block Leader plays a key role in organising residents. He or she must have a reasonably high profile in the neighbourhood, and be able to get on with a variety of people. Ward (1999: 175) points out that '[t]he impact of Mexican community leaders may significantly shape colonos' levels of participation, as well as the settlements' physical development'. Leadership is also highlighted as an important social factor in much of the academic literature on *colonias populares* (e.g. Aguilar 1988; Rivera Lona 1990; Quiñonez Leon 1997; Leal de la Macorra 1998; Turpin 2006). Neighbourhoods with deficient leadership may risk stagnation.

A specific example from Loma Bonita shows how important leadership is to *colonias'* development, and how the Bylaw's discursive construction of the Block Leader may contrast with the residents' lived experiences of place-making. In Loma Bonita, the two prominent community leaders – Don Carlos (Block Leader) and Don Benedicto (President of the *patronato*) – were both founders of the neighbourhood, involved in the original land transactions. Although both owned plots there, Don Benedicto lived elsewhere, in Las Higueras (a nearby, more established *colonia*). He was head of the Casa Blanca Democratic Association, the 'civil society' organisation which was assisting residents to obtain basic services. However, in Loma Bonita at the time of the research, residents complained that organisational processes had ceased almost entirely, symbolised by the suspension of the neighbourhood's weekly meetings some months previously. They linked this to the imprisonment of Don Carlos, the resident Block Leader, who had been accused of fraudulent land sale (as outlined in Chapter Four). During the three months that Don Carlos was in prison, Don Benedicto did not visit the neighbourhood, apparently because he was also implicated in the matter. I later found out that he had claimed *amparo*⁶⁶, and in this way avoided being imprisoned.

⁶⁶ *Amparo* is an action for the protection of constitutional rights in Mexican law, similar to an injunction, which gives the defendant the right of appeal and delay in proceedings.

In terms of leadership, this demonstrates the gap between the idealised construction in the Bylaw, and the materialities of place-making in a *colonia popular*. The Bylaw requires Block Leaders to have an ‘honest way of life’ and no criminal record (DGPC 2004, Article 23). Don Carlos was criminalised for acting as *de facto* community leader, during the *colonia*’s foundation. This may have been because of the more stringent approach being taken by the Municipality with regard to subdivision, where previously it had taken a more lenient stance. It was never clear whether Don Carlos had actually committed fraud, or whether he had been made a scapegoat.

Photo 7.3: CORETT inspection visit, Loma Bonita (Melanie Lombard)



Either way, the case illustrates how, in the twilight legal terrain of Mexico’s *ejidal* land market, certain types of illegal place-making activities (i.e. informal subdivision and land sale) are overlooked on the basis of their benefits to wider society – such as the provision of shelter for the urban poor – as well as to other interests, such as the alleviation of pressure on local authorities for land and housing provision, and to the *ejido* in terms of income from the land sale. Indeed, this type of informal transaction is tacitly sanctioned by the state policy of regularisation. In Loma Bonita’s case, regularisation was posited as a future possibility for the residents (see Photo 7.3), but the process had already been ongoing for at least a year. However, other types of illegal place-making in this context are punished, such as the double selling of land in this case: this was *not* sanctioned by the state, perhaps

because the benefits were confined to one or two individuals (the *ejidatario* and the *coyote*), while the drawbacks (violent confrontation, homelessness, possible social unrest) had the potential to be more widespread.

This also appears to be an example of the authorities' *de facto* 'rule-setting' (Ward 1999: 185), in order to ensure that local leaders do not become too powerful. Regardless of what the *de jure* conditions are, leaders must be aware of the *de facto* regulations which govern their behaviour, in order to maintain their position and safeguard their interests (and those of the neighbourhood). In this case, Don Carlos appeared to be less aware of the particular 'rules' at the time, perhaps though not being up to date with the Municipal Government's more stringent application of policy. On the other hand, Don Benedicto's absence from Loma Bonita indicated that he was aware of this, and thus managed to avoid imprisonment. Either way, the residents of Loma Bonita suffered, due to the lack of leadership during this period, which caused self-organisation processes in the neighbourhood to stagnate. Without a leader, and in relatively isolated circumstances, they had little recourse to other resources, as their direct channel to the authorities was unavailable. This episode, then, shows the central role that leaders play in place-making, but also the authorities' power to manage that role, and by extension the *colonia*.

Relating to the issue of fraud, trust in community leaders is also important. Residents of Loma Bonita reported that they had contributed regular payments for the water supply, as well as one-off payments for other services, but had yet to see results. Indeed, petty fraud was mentioned as a general problem in *colonias populares* during a group interview in Loma Bonita:

Pedro: Well, the people here are very disorganised ... because some co-operate, and others don't want to co-operate. They don't want to co-operate because [leaders] ... come and ask for [economic] co-operation. ... The one that collects the money takes it and he leaves, with the money. ... And we have to start all over again.

ML: When did that happen? The last time that it happened.

Pedro: ... Here it only just happened, [but] it happens in any neighbourhood. In many, many [neighbourhoods] they do that. That's why people are distrustful now, and many don't want to co-operate.

ML: But is there any sort of organisation here, a committee, an association? What do they do?

Lucia: Well, meetings – they say they're going to do this, they ask for co-operation for one thing, they ask for co-operation for another, and we don't see anything [happen], everything's the same (Pedro and Lucia 22.03.07).

The suggestion that perceptions of untrustworthy leadership had led to lower levels of participation, as people became disillusioned with regular meetings, payments and activities, implies that lack of trust affects co-operation. This may also have been a result of the authorities' actions in imprisoning a local leader, which seemingly confirmed residents' mistrust. This seems to show, then, that problematic relationships may exist within *colonias*, as well as between these neighbourhoods and the rest of the city. It is not only 'outsiders' who may act against the perceived collective interests of the *colonia*: exploitation may also be by residents, for example as local leaders. As suggested in the previous chapter, this points to the complexity of power relations in these places, discussed in the next section.

This section has revealed how in Xalapa, the Citizen Participation policy is about managing residents' expectations and indeed, aspirations, as part of place-making. In setting official requirements as a threshold for collaboration with the Municipality – such as formally constituted committees – it guides residents to organise in certain forms, encouraging them to prioritise needs in ways which best suit the authorities. As Aguilar (1998: 43) points out, 'demand-making is rarely socially disruptive and is essentially directed at adapting and coping with the existing situation rather than as a challenge to the existing social order'. In fact, returning to Ward's (1999: 186) assertion, in terms of demand-making, it may be the government which sets the rules. Thus participation, when it is 'the right kind' according to local authority regulations, is rewarded with infrastructure and service provision. However, unsanctioned participation may be punished, as in the case of Don Carlos. Much depends

on the awareness of leaders, and by extension residents, of the *de facto* as well as the *de jure* rules. Sometimes the gap between these leads to the use of ‘unofficial’ strategies, beyond the provisions of policy, explored in the next and final section.

7.3 Beyond Citizen Participation

The final section of this chapter looks at strategies employed by the actors involved in place-making in *colonias populares* that go beyond the framework of Citizen Participation established by the Municipal Government. In the Mexican context, it has been observed that ‘participation’ often goes beyond state prescriptions to include informal activities, bending the rules, or adapting the system (Aguilar 1988: 37). In this section, three sets of strategies – which *colonia* residents and other actors engage in, as part of place-making outside the provisions of policy – are explored: co-operation/unofficial participation; clientelism/pressure; and paternalism/patience. These strategies, which derive from my research findings, are indicative of the complex power relations which contextualise and influence place-making processes in *colonias populares*. In order to understand these relations in a situated way, and explain the complicated geographies of power which locate them, *colonias populares* are explored here as sites of the ‘entanglements of power’ (Sharp et al. 2000). Bearing in mind that power is not unidirectional, and that the capacity to resist always accompanies domination, these strategies are discussed as spatialised entanglements of domination/resistance.

Co-operation/unofficial participation

Official attitudes to *colonias populares* in Mexico are often portrayed as being characterised by ‘tolerance’, as highlighted in the preceding chapter. However, even when residents are self-organised, motivated and informed, obtaining results depends to an extent on the co-operation of the authorities. In both case study neighbourhoods, there seemed to be a generalised perception that under ‘normal’ circumstances, the government does not listen to residents’ requests: things only happen due to extraordinary effort on the part of the residents, or an event such as local elections. Many residents attributed the lack of

services to the local authorities' unwillingness to take action and co-operate with their efforts, which they related to their sense of marginalisation. Sandra from Loma Bonita expressed it thus:

'People say [the colonias] are supposedly outside the centre of Xalapa – but no, they still belong to Xalapa – it's just that the nearest neighbourhoods get priority, and the ones which are furthest away are left, like here' (Sandra 22.03.07).

This response recalls the notion of 'waiting one's turn' suggested by respondents from the Municipality in the previous chapter; but this is refuted by the respondent here. Her opinion is clear: Loma Bonita is part of Xalapa, despite the Municipal Government's prioritisation on the basis of distance, which is a factor in the lack of assistance given to the neighbourhood, and its resulting isolation.

In practice, place-making processes in any given *colonia* (or even street) greatly depend on the residents' attitudes, resources and initiative. This means that some streets take longer than others to obtain basic services, and that some neighbourhoods progress at a much slower rate than others. For example, Loma Bonita residents managed to organise a basic water supply with minimal support, but further improvements have been slow to occur. Residents' achievements which occur 'spontaneously' (i.e. outside the Citizen Participation framework) may be on a smaller scale, and are organised directly with specific departments, or without 'official' help. One example of this is the weekly market in Moctezuma, which was organised by Gracia:

'That little market – do you know it was me that made the request for this market to the official, so that [stallholders] would come and sell here. It's around eight, ten little stalls. ... Previously we didn't have anyone here to sell to us, apart from the shops which are more expensive' (Gracia 14.02.07).

As well as a means of proving residents' collaborative capacity and willingness to participate, unofficial participation may be employed as a coping strategy, a way for

residents to deal with the Municipality's lack of co-operation, and to attempt to meet their own needs regardless.

The idea of unofficial participation relates to views about the role of the state as facilitator, rather than provider. The idea of 'co-responsibility' expressed in the Xalapa Citizen Participation Bylaw seems to embody a wider perception in Mexico that individuals should 'do their bit' to accompany the efforts of the authorities. For example, a local newspaper reported the instigation of a new programme of collaborative works in Coatzacoalcos (a large municipality in the south of Veracruz, seen in Figure 4.2) which involved Municipal officers visiting local *colonias* to participate in work groups every Sunday. The local mayor, inaugurating the programme, was quoted as saying:

'One of the objectives of this programme is to work together, so that it's not just the work of the municipal government or the civil servants, but the residents who work with us and allow us to deliver the best results' (Milenio El Portal 2007).

The idea that residents are also responsible for service provision again recalls the concept of 'multi-actor responsibility' advocated by the Federal Development Programme: in practice this translates into the idea that the government shouldn't or won't provide everything.

Among *colonia* residents, this also seemed to be a commonly-held view. As Magdalena, a resident of Moctezuma, put it:

'It's not easy to have everything: everything in life costs something, and [you attain things] little by little. It's like putting up a house: here people get on with their [construction] jobs little by little. I don't know if you've noticed, they leave their houses half-finished' (Magdalena 14.02.07).

The idea that people should participate and pay on an equal basis, no matter what their circumstances, seems to correspond to some of the more 'heroic' interpretations of informality (e.g. De Soto 2000).

On the other hand, it also fits with what Meyers (2003: 75) calls a policy of ‘benign neglect’, relating to the (lack of) government co-operation, where responsibility is placed on citizens to ameliorate their own circumstances. This was neatly captured by Sebastian:

‘Normally ... whatever we need, we have to go ourselves to the government. The government very rarely bothers to come and see what you need, because of the level of need that exists. ... [It’s like] when one has children – if the child comes to me, I’ll give him something, and if he doesn’t ask me for anything I won’t give him anything. It’s for this reason that there are many abandoned [olvidadas] colonias, because of the laziness of the people – the fact of not going and insisting to the government that they need services (Sebastian 23.02.07).

The response seems to suggest that despite the more ‘systematized’ and ‘routinized’ government in the Mexican context, it is still the case that ‘squeaky wheels get greased first’ (Ward 1999: 177). However, Sebastian’s pragmatic attitude is underpinned by a normative judgement that residents are ultimately responsible for (lack of) progress in a given neighbourhood. The underlying idea seems to be that ‘the poor have to contribute resources of time, effort and money in order to obtain services which the rest of society obtains without direct contribution’ (Devas 1993: 95). It may be the case, as Satterthwaite et al. (2005) have pointed out, that while most people do not want to actively participate in the planning, construction and management of basic services, such as roads, water supply and electricity systems, urban residents whose basic needs are not met have little choice. But while residents participate out of necessity, these responses indicate the internalisation of certain prescriptions about how to act in place (Cresswell 1996; Holloway and Hubbard 2001): residents of *colonias populares* are meant to be self-sufficient, patient and participatory. This could be seen as a form of domination; but resistance can also be found in the residents’ notion of coping with the lack of government co-operation through unofficial participation. These normative ideas about residents’ responsibilities may make more sense in the context of clientelism and paternalism, which are also important strategies in this context, and are discussed below.

Clientelism/pressure

Political manipulation is a theme that arose from the previous chapter's analysis of the discursive construction of *colonias populares* in Xalapa. More specifically, it is often manifested as clientelism, which has been described as 'a system of loyalties of the people to a leader' (Guarneros-Meza 2009: 486) within a corporatist political system, enhancing paternalistic and protectionist relationships from colonial times. Others have seen clientelism as the manipulation of poverty and housing need for political gain (e.g. Gilbert 1994; Meyers 2003). It can take the form of visits, promises and support from political candidates, which, as Alejandra observed, may be deliberately confusing:

'It's very difficult for people to separate economic support and public policies, really. They don't distinguish between a public policy and when [politicians] just offer you hand-outs, a T-shirt, whatever blah-di-blah [cualquier bladibla] in exchange for the vote' (Alejandra 07.03.07).

High-profile campaigns condemning clientelism indicate the extent of the problem. For example, as part of electoral propaganda during the 2007 regional elections, an advert from the National Action Party's television campaign in Veracruz urged voters, '*Toma lo que te dan, pero vota por el PAN*' ('Take what they give you, but vote PAN') (PAN 2007)⁶⁷.

However, clientelism is still a common practice in *colonias populares*, as suggested by Isaac, who detailed various candidates' visits to Loma Bonita in the run-up to local elections, as outlined in the previous chapter. This has generated a cynical attitude among residents, which can be seen in Isaac's remarks:

'[Political candidates] only come here to give out propaganda and everything, when they want to win – and then when they get in, it's "If I saw you, I don't remember [si te vi no me acuerdo]"' (Isaac and Eliza 20.05.07).

His phrasing was similar to that used by Rebeca, a resident of Moctezuma, who said:

⁶⁷ The full script was as follows: 'Red T-shirt: 20 pesos; Hand-outs so you listen to their candidate: 80 pesos; Transport to the rally: 200 pesos. Your children's future: priceless. This 2 September, take what they give you, but vote PAN' (PAN 2007).

'When there are elections, different parties turn up – for example the PRI, the PAN – and they organise an event and invite people. ... But they only do that when they want you to vote for them, and afterwards, "If I saw you, I don't even know you" [si te vi, ni te conozco]' [laughs] (Rebeca 23.02.07).

In a similar vein, Sebastian remarked:

'Normally, it's you that has to go to [the authorities], they are never going to come to you. They'll only turn up to needy colonias when they're in the middle of electoral campaigns, when they need your vote to come out in front – but it's just promises, it's always been the way' (Sebastian 23.02.07).

This final response shows the blurring of boundaries as regards politicians and bureaucrats: the politicised nature of Mexican municipal bureaucracy, in which the civil service is still often based on patronage, means that electoral candidates are directly linked to the personnel of the next administration (and hence its attitude towards *colonias*). But, as the above responses suggest, a visit from a candidate is no guarantee of attention from the next administration. In this sense, *colonias*' perceived status as 'nothing' or invisible places may extend to their treatment by the bureaucracy.

On the other hand, despite Alejandra's concerns about clientelistic persuasion, years of manipulation have resulted in an electorate that knows how to respond to and work the system to their own advantage (as suggested by the PAN campaign). Carla, who lived in one of Moctezuma's 'squatted' areas, explained that despite the exhortations of the squatters' PRI-affiliated leader to support the party's electoral candidate, she relied on the fact that ultimately, there was a free vote:

'Look, I just turn up and I play along, because when I go to vote, I vote for ... whoever seems to really deserve my vote. Because ... it's supposed to be democratic, right? I vote for whoever I want' [laughs] (Carla 28.03.07).

It seems that *colonia* residents, then, knowingly engage in informal clientelistic strategies outside formal participatory structures, to obtain goods and promises from bureaucrats and politicians, in support of place-making. In fact, clientelism may even form part of struggles

for equality and recognition of poor people as citizens (Chatterjee 2004). If promises are not fulfilled, residents may employ other collective strategies, known under the heading of ‘putting pressure on’ the authorities.

‘Pressure’ usually means direct action, in the form of protests, taking over buildings, or blocking roads – which are all seen as legitimate strategies to engage with the authorities. For example, residents of several *colonias* in the north of Xalapa demonstrated in the Municipal Palace following unfulfilled promises of hand-outs from the Mayor (Rojas 2007a). These strategies may also occur alongside formal representations or requests. Even before taking direct action, residents make regular visits to the municipal offices, to follow up their formal petition. Gracia, from Moctezuma, explained it thus:

‘When services are being requested, you have to get people together and go to the offices, the government departments. And if they don’t pay attention, we install ourselves in the Plaza Lerdo⁶⁸ [laughs], I don’t know if you’ve seen the demonstrations? ... We’ve been there, to demonstrate, to request services, to request whatever we need in the colonia’ [laughs] (Gracia 14.02.07).

This could be seen as part of the spectrum of ‘pressure’ which residents apply to local authorities, depending on how successful they are at obtaining their demands through other channels (see Photo 7.4).

Photo 7.4: Demonstration in Plaza Lerdo, Xalapa city centre (Mauro Castro)



⁶⁸ The central plaza in Xalapa, next to the Cathedral and opposite the Municipal Offices.

Sebastian, describing Moctezuma's early years, described how residents persisted with their requests for services which had initially been promised as part of the land acquisition process:

'We carried on insisting by means of marches, demonstrations, there was loads of that. ... But all the same they didn't pay attention, because there's all sorts of people in government. They fob you off [te ponen peros], the ones that see you – the subordinates, rather than the manager. So normally we tried to see the Director General of each department' (Sebastian 23.02.07).

This ties in with the idea that rather than following a 'state versus community' paradigm, the state is rarely represented by one unified entity, but can be 'seen' in a multitude of different settings and forms. Corbridge et al. (2005: 45) assert that marginalised urban residents experience 'the state' in many different ways, depending on their position: 'Sightings are always complex and take shape against the sightings of other individuals, communities and institutions'. It may be for this reason that residents take a multi-pronged approach to negotiating with the authorities, which simultaneously encompasses a range of strategies.

These messy and intertwined relations seem to exemplify the idea of 'entanglements of power'. Resistance in domination occurs through residents' awareness of political manipulation, but also their (relatively new) democratic liberty, meaning they can accept support with no obligation to vote for a particular candidate. Meanwhile, domination in resistance is through political or civil society organisations who manipulate residents to their own ends; even so, these ends are sometimes aligned with the residents' long-term social interests. The element of 'waiting' is a further strategy employed by residents, discussed below in relation to paternalism.

Paternalism/patience

Paternalism is seen as the dependent relationship fostered by clientelistic relations. It often accompanies populist or clientelistic policies, as residents become used to receiving

support, resulting in the maintenance of the status quo. Scheper-Hughes (1992: 64) has observed that in Brazil, a prevalent philosophy exists that 'Every man should be the *dono*, the owner of his own self'. An example of this can be seen in her quotation of a local factory owner's belief that:

'There is not so much poverty in Brazil as there is poverty of spirit, which is worse. [It] means that one is unwilling to improve one's condition. It means that one does not hunger after the better, the finer things in life, that one is content to live and let live' (Scheper-Hughes 1992: 63-4).

In this view, in order to avoid the dependency which paternalism fosters, even the poorest workers must pay for whatever they receive: nothing is given away for free.

Once again, marginalised urban residents are made responsible for their condition. In this context, the institution of 'paternalism' is blamed for a culture of dependency. Joaquin, a senior civil servant from the DGPC, described it in the following way:

'In Mexico we have to eradicate the institution of paternalism, where citizens have the idea that the government will bring them everything, and that the government is obliged to cover the totality of my needs just because I pay taxes, the land tax. It's something that needs to disappear, because at times infrastructure projects take place in exchange for votes. It shouldn't be like that, because that generates a situation where if you vote for me I'll pave your street, but those who don't vote for me, I won't improve their street' (Joaquin 26.02.07).

This suggests a link, not only between paternalism and dependency, but also between paternalism and inequality. On the other hand, it could be argued that such an awareness of paternalism must precede a desire for change. Uneven treatment of *colonias* on a paternalistic basis is suggestive of Corbridge et al.'s (2005) assertion that relations between marginalised residents (and neighbourhoods) and the state are not homogenous. They are also based on information flows, to and from the state, which depend partly on individuals seen to represent the state (Corbridge et al. 2005).

In fact, as suggested earlier in this chapter, local authorities' actions may be as much about maintaining stability as promoting equality or efficiency. Javier, a senior civil servant from the Office of Urban Development, explained the Municipal Government's paternalistic attitude toward 'squatters':

'It's a social, economic and also political situation. ... Drastic reactions regarding these people [are] politically very unpopular and very negative, and I don't think that any party ... is disposed to making itself unpopular. So this type of so-called paternal ... attitude is more or less about trying to order, but not applying the whole force of the law, because that would be very conflictive' (Javier 21.02.07).

As well as corroborating residents' suspicions about the Municipal Government's complicity in land invasions (further discussed in the next chapter), this response also reveals difference within 'the state': it contradicts what Wanda, from the same department, told me about the Municipality's policy of applying its powers more stringently. Furthermore, it reminds us that that 'the state' is capable of collaboration with residents, in ways which may be congruent with their own interests.

On the other hand, faced with sometimes contradictory responses from government, residents may have restricted options. At this point, patience can be a strategy. For example, lack of formal services means addressing issues such as sanitation at a household and neighbourhood level, while waiting for formal services to be introduced. Many households in Moctezuma mentioned using dry latrines when they first moved there. Members of UCISV-Ver received training on how to construct a dry latrine based on a Vietnamese model, using chalk and other minerals to sanitise waste; this also involved a process of re-education for residents who were used to plumbed toilets in rented accommodation or elsewhere.

Another example from Loma Bonita revealed how patience is used as a strategy by residents. In the neighbourhood kindergarten, toilets were fitted, but connected to a septic pit (due to the neighbourhood's lack of drainage). Alicia, who worked in the neighbourhood, told me that the pit was hazardous to children, due to its lack of fencing

and proximity to their playground. However, when filling in the pit was suggested, local mothers complained:

'Their husbands, or their brothers, or their cousins were the ones who had done the work to make that hole, and it was hard work, and there wasn't any way of connecting the toilets to the drainage, because they don't have that service. So [in response to suggestions of filling in the pit] they said, "Our work, and the work of our husbands, and our relatives ... it wouldn't be recognised [by the government], and so ... we're waiting until the service is installed"' (Alicia 26.03.07).

This suggests that residents understand the Municipal Government's formalised, staged process of participation, and are aware that sanctions may apply to residents who are seen to be skipping or diverting a stage. They are therefore 'waiting their turn' and employing patience as a deliberate strategy, to demonstrate their suitability for government intervention.

Highlighting this, Alicia commented on the residents' fears about what would happen if they were not patient:

'Above all, when [the government] finally installs drainage, it won't support [the residents], because they'll see that we're already using the toilet block, and that [the residents] weren't patient, and they installed a latrine. [The residents] explained it to me then' (Alicia 26.02.07).

The strategy of waiting patiently, and making do, may be employed in the short term by residents in order to attain their long-term goals. This suggests an awareness of 'the rules' set by authorities, but also a means of addressing the complex and paternalistic attitudes of the state. Patience may therefore be a coping strategy, similar to unofficial participation. Residents' strategies, such as having two mobile phones, or taking the 'two-footed car' (i.e. walking) (Camelia 16.03.07), reveal the pragmatism and good humour which often accompanies patience. Indeed, waiting in this way could be seen as resistance: but it is framed by the fear of sanctions, and substandard living conditions. In fact, this may be another example of power in place shaping people through self-management (Holloway and Hubbard 2001). On the other hand, resistance in domination can be found in the

multiple and contradictory attitudes of agents of the state, which again could be seen as 'soft subversion' (Sharp et al. 2000: 23).

Given the often restrictive and normative structures of local policy relating to *colonias populares*, it is hardly surprising that residents (and authorities) engage in 'unofficial' strategies, beyond the provisions of the Citizen Participation Bylaw, as discussed in this section. Behaviour on the part of the authorities, such as (lack of) co-operation, clientelism, and paternalism, is met with residents' strategies of unofficial participation, pressure and patience. It may be that these strategies represent a meshing of legacies of old and new structures, in terms of 'participation' in *colonias populares* (Jimenez 1988). However, complex and intertwined power relations, where domination and resistance are both present, and power is fluid rather than unidirectional, suggest that *colonias populares* are sites of entanglements of power. These relations also reveal the messy, non-linear relations between settlements and the authorities, which are multifaceted and fragmented, rather than structured according to a 'good/bad' dualism between a homogenous community and a monolithic state.

7.4 Conclusion

This chapter aimed to answer the research question, 'How does local policy discursively construct *colonias populares*, and what are the effects of this?'. It sought to explore the reification of certain ideas about *colonias populares*, using the local Citizen Participation policy as a concrete example of discursive constructions of these places (and a form of place-making), and contrasting this with residents' lived experiences in the context of power relations. The previous chapter showed that the discursive construction of *colonias populares* in Xalapa often adheres to binary thinking; and that this is not confined to official or 'outsider' views, but also extends to those of residents. This suggests the power of discourses to influence perceptions of place, but it also points to the complexity of the different kinds of actors and (power) relations in these places.

'Citizen Participation' is generally perceived as a spatial issue in Mexico, relating particularly to service provision in *colonias populares*, on the basis of the institutionalisation of pre-existing forms of self-organisation, established by urban social movements and residents. 'Citizen Participation' may also encompass normative ideals about citizenship and development, which can be extremely powerful. This chapter's review of local policy as a concrete example of discursive constructions has shown that once again, *colonias populares* (and their residents) are conceptualised according to normative, and binary, categories. The policy demonstrates the reification of these ideas in its hierarchy of citizens, which is apparently internalised by some residents, as well as instances of self-management which seem to accord with ideas of 'co-responsibility'.

But beyond these constructions in 'official' policy, the entangled power relations revealed in this chapter suggest that 'the state' which is involved in policy-making and interventions in *colonias populares* is multifaceted, complex, and capable of acting in diverse ways, some of which are aimed at securing outcomes based on prevailing interests. On the other hand, agents of the state may also potentially collaborate with residents in a way that supports their particular interests. Local government attempts to manage residents' place-making aspirations and activities, by 'setting the rules', offering services, and applying sanctions where necessary. However, residents can also be informed actors: although they may be disadvantaged or constrained in some ways, they have agency. Moreover, their activities are not necessarily always aimed at the collective benefit of the neighbourhood.

This can be seen in some of the unofficial strategies employed, beyond policy frameworks, by actors involved in place-making in *colonias populares*. These strategies reveal the complex entanglements of power which exist in these places, entailing both domination and resistance. In some cases, these unofficial forms of interaction can be highly productive. This again refutes some of the more 'one-way' accounts of power in views of urban informal settlements which construct residents as oppressed and downtrodden. Seeing *colonias populares* as sites of complex entanglements of power means there is scope for a more nuanced understanding of the influences on the spatial and social construction of place in this setting, and on the contradictory nature of place-making. It may be that these

places – as sites for entanglements of power – intersect with socio-cultural expectations of their residents, and place meanings reflect ideological beliefs or constructions of ‘informality’ found in wider discourses. However, different perceptions can assign different meanings to places, and residents’ own place-making activities have the potential to resist certain discursive constructions and their marginalising effects. This raises questions about what residents’ self-directed activities in terms of place-making, and how this may constitute resistance, which are explored in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 8: A PLACE IN THE CITY: RESIDENT PLACE-MAKING IN *COLONIAS POPULARES*

And is this really a room, or an embrace,
And what is beneath the window: a street or years?
Ivan V. Lalic *Places We Love* (1996)

Introduction

Places are ‘the aggregate of many decisions over time’ (Goodman 1972: 242): the myriad activities and influences brought to bear on a place make it what it is. Seemingly anonymous places in the city are containers of memory and meaning, deriving from activities which take place (or have taken place) there, as the above quotation from Lalic’s poem suggests. Value and meaning are not inherent in place: they are created, reproduced and defended. Place may intersect with socio-cultural expectations to reflect ideological constructions (Cresswell 1996). Previous chapters have shown how, through policy and at the local level, discursive constructions of *colonias populares* impose certain normative categories and meanings on these places and their residents. However, people can also resist the construction of expectations about places by using them in certain ways (Cresswell 2004). Residents’ place-making activities in *colonias populares* could, then, be seen as a form of resistance to some of the more marginalising discursive constructions about them.

This final empirical chapter examines how residents are involved in place-making, which is defined as an everyday social process of constructing and reconstructing space (Burkner 2006). Guided by the research question, ‘How do residents’ place-making activities construct *colonias populares*, spatially, socially and culturally?’, the chapter focuses specifically on the individual and collective efforts of residents of the two case study neighbourhoods. *Colonias populares* usually demand a high degree of place-making by residents, who have to build dwellings and obtain services. I argue that it is through these activities that *colonia* residents resist discursive constructions which separate and divide them from the city: they are constructing their neighbourhoods as places in process of becoming part of the city, confounding binary categorisations. By exploring place-making

in the two case study neighbourhoods, the chapter seeks to challenge understandings of urban informal settlements based on binary conceptions, which portray them as disorderly, unclean, and illegitimate. In debates about urban informal settlements, some of the least-frequently heard voices are those of the residents, and this chapter also seeks to recognise the residents' productive efforts which construct these places. Building on the previous chapter's discussion of political dimensions of place-making, here the focus is on spatial, social and cultural place-making activities (although such categories, used for heuristic purposes, overlap substantially in practice).

The chapter is divided into three sections, loosely based on the conception of place as a socio-spatial construct, with three significant elements: location, locale and place meaning (Agnew 2005). The creation of location, or physical place, may occur through spatial processes such as building; but it can also include activities prior to this, such as hoping or dreaming. These physical place-making activities are discussed in the chapter's first section. Physical place is envisaged by residents as the setting for their social lives, and the second section examines place-making as the creation of a locale, the material setting for social relations. Finally, place meaning underpins all place-making activities, based on the socio-spatial element of place as 'meaningful location' (Cresswell 2004: 7). For this reason, it inevitably arises in the preceding two sections, but it is discussed in more detail in the third section, which focuses on the creation of place meaning through residents' place-making activities. The chapter concludes by returning to the overall aim of the thesis, which is to critically explore and unsettle understandings of informality through a place-making approach to the construction of urban informal settlements, and reflects on the implications these findings have for theories of informality.

8.1 Making location

Using place-making as an analytical lens is based on an understanding of place as process, and in particular the idea of urban informal settlements as places in process, as explored in Chapter Three. If place is 'what takes place ceaselessly, what contributes to history in a specific context through the creation and utilization of a physical setting' (Pred 1984: 279),

then location, or physical place, is important. This section explores resident place-making through land acquisition and building, activities which have an obviously physical or spatial element. But it also looks at 'place imagining', reflecting the fact that in *colonias populares* (as in other contexts), residents' involvement in making the physical setting may begin prior to other, more prosaic processes.

Place imagining

Place-making (as the construction of location) starts even before material realities are involved: it does not begin with inhabitation, but with the first move towards the constitution of place (Chaplin 2007: 109). Place-making processes are not neatly delineated but diffuse and complex, as '[p]laces are never finished but always the result of processes and practices' (Cresswell 2004: 37). Similarly, it is hard to identify when place-making begins, but often, the first step towards physical place-making is imaginative. Even before land acquisition, the making of a location or physical place starts within the imaginations of prospective residents. Many respondents told a personal narrative about their lives in the neighbourhood which began when they were still living elsewhere, outside Xalapa or in rented accommodation, before they had acquired land. They had saved for, dreamed of, and looked for a piece of land adequate for their needs, often over the course of many years, before finally acquiring their parcel. Rocio, of Moctezuma, told me that she had always wanted a plot of land in Xalapa:

'I've always moved around with my husband in lots of places, because he's captain of the State Mobile Smelting Group. And I've been in lots of nice places, cold, hot, I've had a bit of everything. ... But I always said to my husband, "The day that you buy me a little plot, make it Xalapa – even if it's just a little wooden shed, let it be Xalapa" – and he fulfilled my wish' (Rocio 28.03.07).

The respondent's clear idea of not just *what* she wants (a place of her own), but *where* (the city of Xalapa), shows that the supposed lack of agency on the part of *colonia* residents, relating to location and living conditions (e.g. Walker 2001), is not necessarily correct. Here, the idea of a particular place, in this case the city of Xalapa, is associated with

permanence and attachment, and implicitly with the idea of a 'home'. In fact, this respondent explicitly privileges place over living conditions, suggesting location is as important a consideration for residents of *colonias populares* as for any other urban dweller, albeit subject to certain constraints. Xalapa's particular qualities of place, such as its climate and its flora (evoked by the moniker 'City of Flowers'), were also mentioned by residents of *colonias populares*, indicating their own sense of agency in justifying their choice of city.

Vicente, a long-term resident of Moctezuma who had bought a house in *obra negra* (i.e. unfinished) from a family member, described the process of finishing the building work:

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

The implication is that the process of attaining your own place is not easy or straightforward; but the imagined outcome is a source of motivation which sustains residents' efforts, particularly during difficult periods. In this case, the idea of dreaming as a form of resistance (Pile 1997: 3) seems relevant, relating to the unfavourable conditions which residents have to endure (for example, in expensive or poor quality rented accommodation) prior to obtaining a place of their own. This may also relate to the neighbourhood's hoped-for trajectory, from *ejidal* land to 'consolidated' *colonia popular*.

On the other hand, place imagining may be less abstract and more prosaic or functional, based on the economic realities of life in the city. Martin, the representative from the Ejido Chiltoyac, gave the following account of *colonia* formation:

'I feel that more than anything here, people's need [matters]. ... They come from villages or farms to the cities looking for jobs, then that means that first they pay rent, but then they want to acquire a little plot, to make their own house, so then often they form groups of people, with leaders. There's a leader, they look for land for them, those leaders, then they talk to the ejidatarios ... and there's a process, and they start to divide up lots. Of course, they compensate them, maybe it's not a payment that they give to the ejidatario, but

compensation per field. They divide it into lots, they subdivide there, and that's when a colonia begins. But it's people's need, no?' (Martin 10.05.07).

In this response, a complex combination of social factors, including necessity, aspiration, and constraint, is identified. Amid these considerations, which may act as structural constraints or alternatively motivating factors, the element of desire stands out: the human, social need for a place of one's own (e.g. Relph 1976). In identifying the moment of land transaction and subdivision as the point when a *colonia* begins, Martin also subtly highlights all that precedes this moment: the stories of hope, desire and aspiration that lie behind it.

Acquiring the land

The idea of an imagined place, then, drives individuals' efforts to acquire land, which may be a prolonged process, depending on various factors. In the case of Loma Bonita, the land acquisition process was similar to that by which most *colonias populares* in Mexico are formed, through the informal sale of *ejidal* land from the original owner to private buyers, via an intermediary. The primary criteria for acquisition was financial, namely the buyer's ability to meet the seller's price. Buying in groups headed by a 'leader' is not uncommon, to act as a 'broker' in the process (as Martin indicates above); and groups may be based on political association, as mentioned in previous chapters. The first settlers to arrive in Loma Bonita were organised in a group based on family ties (Camelia 16.03.07), but these connections were reinforced by political affiliation: Don Carlos, the leader of the group, had connections to the local PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party). In fact, due to the organisational processes involved in acquiring land, it is not unusual for streets or blocks in *colonias* to have the same political tendency: for example, in the case of Moctezuma, blocks of plots in Xalapa's Territorial Reserve were distributed by the State Government to different political groups involved in the urban social movement.

The role of political organisations in land acquisition means that they often set their own criteria for qualification, such as attendance at meetings, marches and other political activities. Rebeca, a long-term resident of Moctezuma, obtained her plot through the social

movement UCISV-Ver, one of the groups granted land in the Territorial Reserve by the State Government:

'I got the plot in about a year I reckon, in meetings' (Rebeca 23.02.07).

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

Photo 8.1: Demonstration in Veracruz by rural workers demanding land (Mauro Castro)



The practice of active political participation in exchange for land seems to be widely accepted within urban social movements in Mexico (see Photo 8.1). Another Moctezuma resident, Gracia, who was also a member of UCISV-Ver, described the process as follows:

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

The presence of organised groups may facilitate negotiations with the authorities. However, the land acquisition process fostered by such organisations could also be seen as clientelistic, in a similar fashion to the patron-client relations discussed in Chapter Six. Offering land in exchange for political activity could be seen as another form of exploiting the needs of the poor for political ends, by political or ‘civil society’ organisations – the distinction being quite blurred in this context.

Photo 8.2: Invaded land in Moctezuma (Melanie Lombard)



This form of ‘clientelism’ may also involve political organisations putting pressure on the local government (on behalf of people with housing need), through direct action in the form of land invasions, as seen in Moctezuma. Alejandra, who worked for another organisation in the *colonia*, told me that the group *Francisco Villa* had led the invasion of green areas there (see Photo 8.2):

‘It’s the green area of the colonia, but ... residents haven’t bothered to turn it into a real recreational space, so [the group] see the land and they take it. It’s a form of pressuring the government so that they are given land somewhere else. ... They’re waiting there to be assigned land somewhere else’ (Alejandra 07.03.07).

However, other residents told me that the leader of this group, Daniel Rendón, was manipulating people’s need for land for his own political ends. Moreover, they suggested

that he was tacitly supported by factions in the Municipal Government, who saw squatting as a legitimate means to resolve the housing need of the settlers, and maximise the use of the land in Moctezuma. Certainly, this was suggested by particular representatives of the Municipal Government, as discussed in the last chapter.

Because of this, Julio, a senior civil servant in the State Heritage Department, cautioned me that such organisations, which often claim to be part of ‘civil society’, are in fact political. This, he said, is on the basis of their involvement in

‘[i]nvasions, unlawful occupation of land. [Land] that these organisations have assigned – because they have assumed the role of champions of the cause [luchadores sociales] – perverting the law. That’s why I would say, be very careful with regard [to these organisations]’ (Julio 02.03.07).

However, many residents seem willing to participate in such groups: not only at the stage of land acquisition, but on an ongoing basis. This may reflect their ‘debt’ to the groups, based on the exchange of land for political activity. For example, UCISV-Ver is often involved in organising political activity supporting the Democratic Revolution Party (PRD) with existing residents from Moctezuma, as well as from other *colonias* where they operate (Gracia 14.02.07). However, such groups also contain an element of resistance to the established political order; albeit resistance contextualised by domination in the form of clientelistic relations.

Land acquisition, then, always requires some sort of investment, in the form of time, money, presence, or a vote. The pay-off and motivation for this is ownership, whether *de facto* or *de jure*, of a particular space where place-making can occur. But shared history, on the basis of acquisition processes among the ‘original’ residents, can create strong bonds which later help in organising to obtain resources and services. Olga, from Moctezuma, described how:

‘At the beginning, we got to know each other through [UCISV-Ver], and because of that it was very easy to integrate as a team. Now it’s like people have ... come to the neighbourhood, and they’ve got involved. ... Now we’re

not [just] the people from UCISV-Ver ... now we're the people, the residents of Quetzalcoatl [Street]. And so that implies another process of integration' (Olga 05.02.07).

Similarly, Vicente of Moctezuma spoke of the 'emotional bonds' between residents that develop on the basis of living together through difficult conditions:

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

These responses concur with Ward's (1999: 181) suggestion that a high level of participation in establishing the *colonia* and obtaining services is not only a social necessity, but also 'enhances the emergence of a genuine sense of community'.

Building

Photo 8.3: UCISV-Ver contractor using basic construction techniques (Melanie Lombard)



After residents acquire a plot of land, they often need to clear and prepare it before they can start construction, which may begin with just a one-room shack, depending on housing need and economic resources. These factors, among others, determine how quickly construction progresses, and whether the household finances the construction (using building contractors, as seen in Photo 8.3) or actually does the work themselves. Once the plot is theirs, many residents spend their free time visiting, clearing and levelling it, which is often necessary before construction begins. While this is clearly on the basis of economy and necessity, it also requires emotional investment, as well as investment of time and resources.

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

'Everything that's extra here we did it, including the [concrete] floor, we put it down between all of us, because we had the material, but we didn't have the money! [laughter] ... I said, "Well we've paid for it so this floor is going to work out, no? Well, what can we do, children, let's have a go eh?" Imagine, they were mixing gravel and [I said], "Grab the wheelbarrow and get in there with all that [building] material". And my children [said] "Oh, Mum!", and I said "Never mind, come on". We put down half [the floor] one day, and then the next day, we put down this side' (Olivia 05.02.07).

The involvement of children in the building process shows how necessity plays an important role in physical construction processes: all available family members are expected to take part. This perhaps also relates to the fact that *colonias populares* are often populated by female-headed households, who may be less likely to either have the resources to pay contractors, or the presence of adult male members of the household to do the work. Symbolically, this collaboration is also important, as it indicates solidarity at the family level, through collective involvement in the construction of home.

Photo 8.4: Construction shored up by earth and stones in Moctezuma (Melanie Lombard)



Necessity may also determine the lapse between acquiring the land and starting construction, and between construction and moving in, which vary depending on the circumstances of the household. One respondent told me she had acquired the land and moved in a week later (Carla 28.03.07), while others had had the land for several years before starting to build and then moving in. Sometimes the work required meant that the family could not move in for a more prolonged period, such as in the case of Isaac, a resident of Loma Bonita who had bought a plot on a particularly uneven piece of land, where it was necessary to shore up construction (an example of which can be seen in Photo 8.4):

Eliza: For us it was really hard to build here because it was all sunken, up to there, and he filled it in.

ML: You filled it in?

Isaac: Yes.

Eliza: Yes, he brought the earth from elsewhere.

ML: That's a lot of work isn't it?

Isaac: Yes, it was hard.

ML: How long were you working at that?

Isaac: Two years.

Eliza: Just him, on his own. Down there [under the house] you can see the cement comes up really high, and all that ... was what he filled in (Isaac and Eliza 20.05.07).

Commencing building was also mentioned by respondents as an indicator of the occupier's housing need, as many had been paying rent elsewhere, which was seen by several residents as 'wasting money' (e.g. Gracia 14.02.07).

Photo 8.5: Basic shack dwelling in Moctezuma (Melanie Lombard)



The initial shelter is often a temporary construction of wood and zinc metal sheeting (an example of which can be seen in Photo 8.5). Many residents talked about how they started construction by building a one-room structure, which was the basis for the rest of the house, as in the case of Rebeca, a single mother in Moctezuma:

'I didn't have money to build, because even to buy wood or something ... you need money. So first of all I made a room here, this was my room with everything in it, but it didn't have a concrete roof, it was metal sheeting' (Rebeca 23.02.07).

Given that building materials are a primary cost, some residents were only able to pay for the most necessary tasks, such as finishing the internal walls. Members of the family may

do the rest, including jobs such as connecting to electricity and water mains, installing windows, hanging doors etc:

'If you've got money and you can contract [builders], that avoids problems, right? But here, because there isn't much [money], there are lots of people that didn't contract' (Olivia 05.02.07).

In other words, the economic situation of the household determines how much work is done by contracted professionals as opposed to family members. This agrees with Gilbert's (1994: 88) assertion that the critical ingredient is money, for materials and labour if necessary, as 'settlements are gradually transformed from ramshackle structures into consolidated neighbourhoods'. It also implies a level of self-teaching, as residents make themselves experts in a variety of construction skills.

Photo 8.6: UCISV-Ver member supervising construction work on plot (Melanie Lombard)



Even when better-off residents use contractors (as seen in Photo 8.6), the process can have drawbacks:

'[The house] was part built when we bought here. I bought it from an aunt and we finished the construction, but it was rather laborious – tiring and really exhausting – due to living with the [construction] workers. Because sometimes you can't find responsible workers, and you spend more time than you'd programmed, the costs are higher' (Vicente 23.02.07).

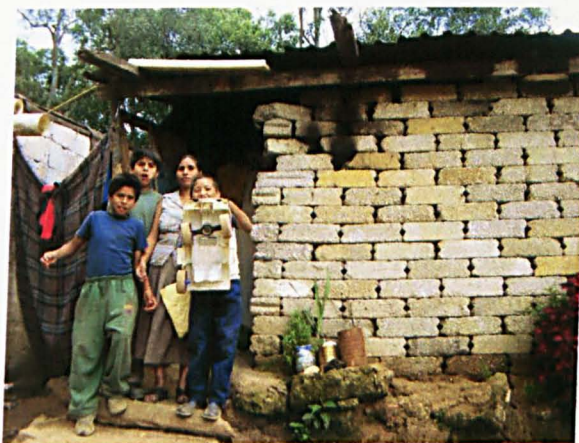
In Loma Bonita, where incomes are lower and residents' situations more precarious, fewer contractors are used, and high levels of resident self-build can be seen from the number of houses built with temporary materials (wood and zinc, or breezeblocks without cement, as seen in Photo 8.7). There are however positive outcomes of high levels of resident participation in housebuilding processes, discussed in the later section on 'place meaning'.

Many respondents in my research talked of having to struggle (*luchar*) and of the sacrifices (*sacrificios*) they had made to obtain their plot, house or services. As Varley (2008: 21) puts it, in the context of *colonias populares*:

'It is difficult to imagine the centrality of the notion of '*sufriendo*' ('suffering') or '*batallando*' (struggling) to people's accounts of what it means to build their houses; but the point of those accounts is generally that suffering is what the narrator went through in order to get to where they are now'.

The narrative of suffering appears to give credit to those who had to put up with most: it often refers to those who settle first, when there are no services. But it is also part of a shared history, or narrative, of place: suffering in unity contributes to a sense of integration, or collective place-making. This idea of 'suffering' seems to relate particularly to the physical processes involved in making a location.

Photo 8.7: House made of breezeblocks without cement, plants in cans (Melanie Lombard)



So creating a physical setting involves suffering and hard work, as well as land acquisition and building, as discussed in this section. It is based on continual improvement, as the place that is being made is a place in process. In this sense, it could be seen as never-ending, once again recalling the notion that houses in *colonias populares* are rarely regarded as finished (Varley 2007). In this way, it also involves dreaming, about the place that is in process of becoming. Place as process, or a work in progress, is imbued with meaning: the meaning of residents' efforts, of their struggles and sacrifices, but also their aspirations. In these places, the spatial and physical speak of the history of the settlement and its residents, and also hint at its potential future. The narratives in this section are very different to portrayals of 'squatting' and 'slums' discussed in Chapter Two; and residents' depictions of these processes, while containing pragmatic acknowledgements of the constraints they operate within, also emphasise their own agency. The creation of a physical place provides the setting for social relations, discussed in the next section.

8.2 Making locale

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

Religious practices

Religion is an important social and cultural practice in *colonias populares*, as elsewhere in the city, at the household and neighbourhood scale. On one occasion I was invited to celebrate the erection of a cross on the roof of a house in Loma Bonita. The family who owned the house had decided to erect the cross as a marker of their religious faith, and they

were celebrating this with a party (Isaac and Eliza 20.05.07). This act could be seen as a mix of the religious, the aesthetic and the social, as well as being a symbolic gesture. It is a way of staking claim to a place, of marking the end or beginning of a process (perhaps the 'blessing' of a house which has finally been finished, or the start of a new life in the neighbourhood), and of giving thanks – to God, but also implicitly to those who have been involved in the construction of the house and by extension the neighbourhood. Putting the cross on the outside of the house, on the roof, is a means of communicating this message to all residents of the neighbourhood, and may contribute to emotional identification with place, and hence to forging place meaning, or 'place identity'. The latter has been defined as 'cultural value shared by the community, a collective understanding about social identity, intertwined with place meaning' (Harner 2001: 660). Elsewhere, it has been seen as deriving from place-based meaning, symbolised by features or icons, as 'the "glue" of familiarity that binds people to place', and influences their connectedness to a place (Bruce Hull et al. 1994: 110). The cross, then, could be seen as a spatial symbol of the collective religious faith which binds people together, and to place.

Photo 8.8: Chapel in Loma Bonita (solicited photo, Sandra)



In Loma Bonita, there is also a Catholic chapel (see Photo 8.8), which was built and funded by the residents with some support from churches in neighbouring *colonias*. In this way, the chapel is a symbol of links with wider, external networks outside the neighbourhood. The small building on the main street is just big enough to hold two tables and a shelf with

various icons, and provides seating space for around ten people. Its existence shows that residents prioritised creating a place for religious worship over other socio-spatial elements; the neighbourhood does not, for example, have a *cantina*, unlike Moctezuma. A chapel was also one of the easiest facilities to set up, requiring little more than a plot, a rudimentary three-sided building and a blessing from the priest, which was arranged following the donation of the land by a local family, and the building of the structure by a group of residents. As well as expressing collective identity, the chapel is also an indicator of social and cultural relations with other neighbourhoods, making it part of the city, rather than a separate, isolated entity.

Photo 8.9: Bell in Loma Bonita, with plants beside it (Melanie Lombard)



Given the high levels of religious adherence in Mexico, where 95 per cent of the population are Catholic (Heritage 2004), it is not surprising that religion plays an important role in *colonias populares*. In Loma Bonita, prior to the construction of the chapel, services were held on the street, indicating their importance as a social and cultural activity. This also suggests an element of flexibility relating to space: people were prepared to use ‘public’ space for Mass in the absence of alternatives, perhaps indicative of the stake that residents feel they have in a neighbourhood which they have been closely involved in constructing. Near to the chapel is a large bell (Photo 8.9) which was bought and installed by residents on the main street even before the chapel was finished, showing that the most important thing was to be able to call people to Mass, and providing a symbol of religious faith before the

structure of the chapel existed. Religious meetings, and the use of a bell (as an aural social and cultural practice) to call people to Mass, are things which happen all over the city. Religious gatherings make this neighbourhood as 'ordinary' as anywhere else in the city, resisting the idea of its separateness.

On the other hand, religious expression in Moctezuma reveals resistance in another direction, to the dominance of the Catholic church. In the neighbourhood, the most prominent chapel belongs that of the religious denomination *Luz del Mundo* or Light of the World (Photo 8.10). This movement was founded in the 1920s in a *colonia popular* in Guadalajara, Mexico, where its flagship church and headquarters remain (Fortuny Loret de Mola 1995). It has an established presence in *colonias populares* in Mexico, and its churches are notable in that they are usually financed and constructed almost entirely by local congregation members, in keeping with the self-build processes of these neighbourhoods. As an urban working class religion, it provides a point of identification for residents who may have retreated from the 'aggressive' Catholic church (Gledhill 2006), which continues to be associated with the state as a traditional structure of authority.

Photo 8.10: Luz del Mundo chapel in Moctezuma (Melanie Lombard)



The chapel seen here is small, with only around 15 members, but in Moctezuma it provides a symbolic alternative to the domination of the Catholic church. Gledhill (2006) locates the potential for resistance through membership of such new religious movements as a 'lifestyle choice' which may (for example) provide a route out of everyday violence in marginalised neighbourhoods. Such cultural place-making practices, exemplified here by the construction of religious or spiritual symbols, provide a symbolic focal point for residents to express identification with, or resistance to, more established structures. In this way, place-making may be an act of defiance in the face of dominating power (Schneekloth and Shibley 1999). Thus in a largely Catholic country like Mexico, *colonias populares* can be a site of resistance through alternative religious expression, as well as a focus for more orthodox religious activity. The social element of such practices can be found in other areas, discussed here under the heading 'conviviality'.

Conviviality

Photo 8.11: Family meal to thank local official (solicited photo, Blanca and Gabriela)



The high levels of social gatherings which characterise both neighbourhoods are referred to as 'conviviality', in Illich's (1980 in Peattie 1998: 247) sense of 'autonomous and creative intercourse among persons, and the intercourse of a person and their environment'. Peattie (1998: 247) locates conviviality in 'the element of sociable pleasure in many kinds of purposeful activities and ... its importance in the variety of ways in which people together

make and remake their world'. In the case study *colonias*, intra-neighbourhood visits were very common, and several times as I interviewed a respondent, other neighbours came and went, often spontaneously participating in the conversation (e.g. Natalia 01.05.07, Iris 26.04.07). Hospitality is highly valued in Mexico, and it was common during the research for people to refer to their home as '*la casa de usted*' or 'your house'.

Photo 8.12: Killing a pig in preparation for meal (solicited photo, Blanca and Gabriela)



Gilbert (1994) invokes this spirit of social interaction when he describes collective effort in an atmosphere of gaiety in the process of settlement improvement (discussed in Chapter Two). The link between the collective wellbeing of the settlement and social activity can be seen in the example of a dinner in Loma Bonita to thank a local official for helping with the release of Don Carlos from prison (see Photos 8.11 and 8.12). Social gatherings for specific occasions are important to the social life of the neighbourhood, and in Loma Bonita I was invited to events to celebrate Mothers' Day, a residents' name day, and a child's graduation from kindergarten. Such events tend to be gatherings of people of all ages, from the youngest children to the eldest householders.

Photo 8.13: Girls dancing for Mothers' Day in Loma Bonita (solicited photo, Sandra)



Events often start during the day, with a Mass or formal presentation (such as a rehearsed dance by children for Mother's Day, seen in Photo 8.13); and then there is food, drink and dancing. Residents of Loma Bonita told me that celebrations sometimes went on into the early hours, with people dancing in the streets. Often, whoever was organising the party would hold a collection in order to be able to afford certain necessary things, such as food, drink and hiring a sound system, and sometimes community buildings would be used as a venue, such as the school in Loma Bonita. The way in which such celebrations were discussed, with evident pride and the extension of an invitation to outsiders, suggests that these gatherings are important for residents in terms of place meaning. As Paz [1961] (1985: 52) points out, 'The fiesta is participation ... a social event based on the full participation of all its celebrants'. In this sense, conviviality is an expression of collective endeavour in place-making; but it is also about facing difficulty and sacrifice, and maintaining personal and collective integrity in the face of these elements.

Photo 8.14: Football pitch in Loma Bonita (Mauro Castro)



Sport also provides an opportunity for social activity. In Loma Bonita, football is a collective activity, and the football pitch is one of the few areas where people regularly gather, in the absence of other officially-designated public space (see Photo 8.14). Three years ago, a resident there, Isaac, organised the transformation of a piece of scrubland into the football pitch, getting younger residents to clear the land with picks and shovels, painting white lines with a machine borrowed from the Municipality, and cutting down trees for goalposts. It is rudimentary, but well-used: every Sunday boys and men gather to play, while women sit at the side and watch, sometimes selling sweets or soft drinks. People come from outside the neighbourhood, providing a tangible link with this place and the rest of the city: they have their own local pitches, but prefer to play in Loma Bonita on Sundays, because of the crowd.

Football may be one of the key focuses of collective activity in informal neighbourhoods, in the absence of other, centralised institutions. Football teams have been described as ‘vehicles of social contact’ between men from within and outside marginalised neighbourhoods, providing an important interface with residents and the rest of the city

(Lomnitz 1977: 204-17). In this case, the football pitch and the regular games provide Loma Bonita with a positive alternative identity: it becomes known as 'the place for Sunday football', rather than 'the poor neighbourhood', or as 'that isolated neighbourhood'. However, the land is borrowed from the Municipal Government, meaning the pitch has an uncertain future, despite requests to the Government to donate it:

'It's not certain, it belongs to the Government ... we've just asked them [for it], but who knows?' (Isaac and Eliza 20.05.07).

This shows that residents' attempts to organise and make a place for social activities also depend to a degree on the co-operation of local authorities (as discussed in Chapter Seven). While football is a shared social and cultural practice, which links the neighbourhood with the rest of the city, it could also be seen as a form of defiance, in that it takes place on land which is of uncertain tenure.

Schooling

Schooling, or education, is an extremely important activity which takes place in many neighbourhoods, highlighted by the solicited photo exercise, in which five out of six participants took photos of schools in the neighbourhoods (see for example Photo 8.15). As an important indicator of a neighbourhood's links with the rest of the city, ideas about education are often embodied in a neighbourhood's primary (or sometimes secondary) school. Schooling is a key social activity, especially where there are lots of children, and residents emphasised the importance of good quality children's education being available in, or near to, their *colonia*. Residents may have participated in constructing the local school, as in Loma Bonita: however, the ensuing problems in this case highlight some of the wider issues relating to the significance of schooling in *colonias populares*, discussed here.

Photo 8.15: School in Moctezuma (solicited photo, Fernanda)



As mentioned in previous chapters, the school building in Loma Bonita, used as a kindergarten at the time of the research, was constructed in 2000 as a primary school, by residents with support from the Municipal Government. It initially operated with two teachers from the rural community education service, the National Council for the Promotion of Education (CONAFE)⁶⁹, for several years, before growing class sizes prompted residents to apply for teachers from the urban education service, the Veracruz State Education Department (SEV)⁷⁰. However, at the same time, an application from the residents of adjacent neighbourhood Ignacio Zaragoza for a SEV-accredited primary school there was submitted, and this was approved first.

⁶⁹ CONAFE provides teachers at preschool and primary level for rural communities with between five and 30 children. Teachers are seen as community instructors who live in the community during the week, often in quite isolated areas.

⁷⁰ SEV offers primary school services to urban communities with 30 or more children, or on occasion fewer (from a minimum of 20), if there are many young children in preschool who are likely to enter primary soon.

Photo 8.16: Primary school in Ignacio Zaragoza/school building in Loma Bonita (Melanie Lombard/solicited photo, Blanca and Gabriela)



As a result, only one salon in the Loma Bonita school building is now used, for CONAFE preschool education. The local primary school is operated by SEV in Ignacio Zaragoza, in an unfinished residential building (see Photo 8.16). SEV rules that there must not be more than one primary school within a radius of 1,000 metres, meaning that there cannot be one operating in Loma Bonita. This has created ill-feeling between the two neighbourhoods, as residents from Loma Bonita suspect those from Ignacio Zaragoza of bribing officials to undercut them (Camelia 16.03.07). They feel that the school which they built is only being half-used, in favour of an unsuitable building, with a poor teaching service from SEV (Alicia 26.03.07). Because of this, many residents do not send their children to this school, preferring to send them to the primary school in Colonia Sumidero, two kilometres down the road. Children arrive by bus, or walk if it is raining or there is no money for the bus fare, but the distance means their attendance is not always regular.

The construction of the school building (with the support of the Municipality) is clearly seen by the residents of Loma Bonita as one of their most important achievements. As a form of place-making, it involved the initiative and hard work of the residents, in collaboration with the authorities. Here, its particular significance is the creation of the neighbourhood as a locale, for education or schooling. In this sense, education is symbolic of links with the wider city, as well as of the neighbourhood's 'official' status. Being transferred from one educational system to another denotes a change in a neighbourhood's

status, from rural to urban. The criteria for transferring from CONAFE to SEV is class size, meaning that it is an indicator of population growth: so by applying for a change in this system, the neighbourhood is demonstrating its progress and prospects for future growth. However, in the situation described above, Loma Bonita was symbolically deprived of urban status; residents' sending children to school outside the local area could be a form of objection or resistance to this.

In this way, the issue of schooling also shows how place-making may be conflictual, as well as co-operative, in the context of *colonias populares*. Here, the conflict arose from rivalry between two sets of residents of adjacent neighbourhoods, who were set in competition against each other for the status of more developed neighbourhood, in order to obtain the benefits that accompany this. Such points of conflict can create ongoing resentment between *colonia* residents, which may be misplaced but continues to simmer, fracturing communities who could potentially work together. However, once again, it may be that this state of affairs suits the authorities who can then deal with neighbourhoods separately, rather than facing their combined strength.

This section has discussed the element of collective endeavour in place-making, to create a locale for residents' social and cultural activities. This seems to echo Peattie's (1998) assertion that conviviality is not a way to solve problems, but to rise above them through celebration: it can happen when resources are scarce and serious problems do not go away, as a means of expressing solidarity through joy. The creation of a locale for residents' activities ties the spatial aspects of place to social ones, such as religious practices, conviviality, and education (as seen in this section). 'Resistance' may be found in residents' assertion of their agency through 'normal' social activities, in the context of marginalising discursive constructions of their neighbourhoods. Indeed, Kellett (2002: 28) remarks that squatters' consciousness of their low social position determines how '[t]heir efforts can be interpreted as a striving for dignity and respect'. This, in turn, contributes to place meaning, or sense of place, in *colonias populares*.

8.3 Making place meaning

The idea of place meaning, or ‘sense of place’, rests on the characterisation of place as ‘meaningful location’: it refers to the ‘subjective and emotional attachment people have to place’ (Cresswell 2004: 7). This section explores the production of place meaning in *colonias populares* through residents’ physical, social and cultural place-making activities. Specifically, the discussion focuses on ‘vernacular’ architecture, home, and place naming.

Vernacular architecture

Photo 8.17: INFONAVIT development to the rear of Moctezuma (Melanie Lombard)



The diverse forms of housing in *colonias populares* reflect the place-making processes that individual households undertake. Whether residents use contractors or do most of the work themselves, their dwellings reflect their own preferences to a certain degree, as the high level of resident participation in housebuilding means that the design of the house is to the owner’s particular tastes. While other factors, particularly economic and legal, may act as constraints, there is a generalised preference for individually-designed houses in Mexico. A social housing expert in Mexico City suggested that this is determined by cultural factors, namely the importance of building and owning a family home to pass on to one’s children, and the desire to live close to the ground rather than at height, in order to feel like the owner of the land (Juan Martínez 10.11.06). During a residents’ meeting that I attended in

Moctezuma, a group of women were asked whether they would prefer to live in a nearby government-built INFONAVIT⁷¹ neighbourhood (*Las Fuentes*, seen in the distance in Photo 8.17) instead of their *colonia*. The answer was a resounding ‘No’, with participants describing the government-built two-storey terraced houses as small, monotonous and cramped. This point is echoed by Varley (2007: 20) in her work on *colonias populares* in Guadalajara, where she notes ‘the almost universal condemnation heaped upon ... residents of the government housing project by people in the self-help settlements, to the effect that they were all style, no substance’.

Photo 8.18: Different architectural styles in Moctezuma (Melanie Lombard)



The result of these preferences and constraints is that many urban informal settlements, where houses are almost wholly built or financed by residents, reflect a style of architecture which has been described as having much in common with ‘vernacular’ architecture (Kellett 2002). How residents choose to build their homes may depend to a degree on the traditional architecture of the resident’s place of origin, as Olga explained about her house in Moctezuma:

‘We’re from the south [of Veracruz], and in the south it’s hot. ... In San Andres, there’s lots of vegetation, lots of plants, lots of water, and there are houses with a very high roof, and ... a corridor, which here is the entrance

⁷¹ INFONAVIT is Mexico’s largest public housing programme, based on salaried workers’ contributions and government subsidies. For a fuller explanation, see Chapter Four.

hall: the space in front, where you put lots of plants. This was the idea that I had in my house. So I reproduced as far as I could the design of San Andres, the design of the south' (Olga 05.02.07).

It appears that architecture adds to the character of these places, as *colonias populares* but also as unique neighbourhoods (see Photo 8.18). This is contrary to observations that housing in *colonias* impedes residents' ability to express their social identity (Walker 2001), or aesthetic preferences (Viviescas 1989 in Hernández 2008). As Kellett (2002) suggests, the incremental building process, which often takes place over the course of many years, results in houses that are containers of meaning and memory. Much more than just shelter, they express, through their layout, architecture and interior design, ideas about progress and tradition, identity and memory. Some examples of *colonia* housing can be seen in Photo 8.19.

Photo 8.19: Different housing styles in central *colonia* and Loma Bonita (Melanie Lombard)



Home

The link between identity and place-making certainly seems to be evident relating to processes of creating home as meaningful place, or 'home-making'. Friedmann's definition of place-making as the process of appropriating space in order to create a 'mirror of self' (Cooper Marcus 1995 in Friedmann 2007: 259), outlined in Chapter Three, refers to activities within the home, such as hanging pictures and putting down rugs; while at

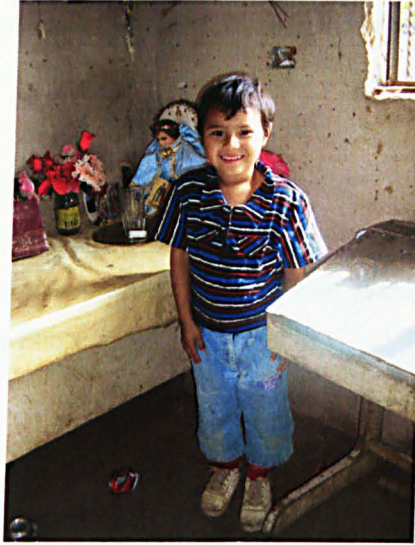
neighbourhood level, he suggests that appropriating space may occur through collective naming and signifying activities, which are discussed below. Bridging the conceptual divide between ‘home’ and ‘neighbourhood’, individual households may also contribute to a sense of place through activities such as painting the external walls of their dwelling (as seen in Photo 8.19). Indeed, some suggest that this is an important indicator in terms of a neighbourhood’s consolidation (Onnis Luque, personal communication, 31 March 2007).

Photo 8.20: Kitchen in Loma Bonita (Melanie Lombard)



Similarly, within the home, décor or interior design could also be seen as place-making, a form of ‘making oneself at home’ which contributes to emotional identification with place. *Colonia* residents displayed ingenuity and creativity in decorating and using their home spaces, such as a kitchen wall hung with brightly-coloured pottery as a backdrop for meals (see Photo 8.20), or an altar decorated with flowers and offerings in a child’s bedroom (see Photo 8.21). Functional use of inside space included converting a sitting room into a workshop (as seen in Photo 4.34). The latter appropriation of home as productive space shows the importance of tailoring physical structure to a household’s needs. Residents also talked about how the internal design of their house was as important as the external form, in order to accommodate the needs of all householders, such as children and elderly relatives.

Photo 8.21: Decorated altar in Loma Bonita (Melanie Lombard)



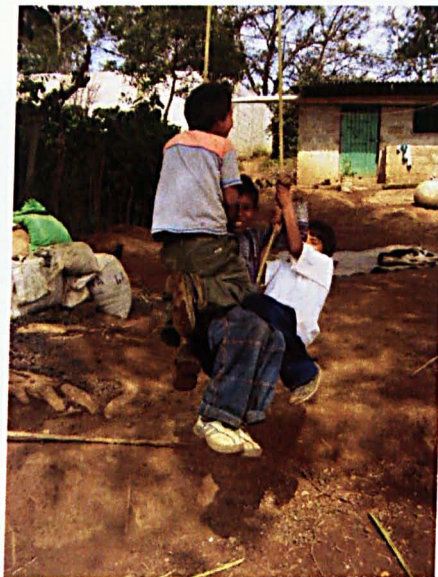
As well as inside space, my research indicated the importance of the outside space encompassed by 'home'. This seems to be particularly salient in *colonias populares*, where most houses have some land attached immediately outside, which is often used for functional but also aesthetic purposes. As discussed in Chapter Four, outside space in Loma Bonita takes the form of a patio used for a variety of activities, such as washing clothes and people, storing water (see Photo 8.22), keeping animals such as pigs and hens, preparing food and cultivating crops.

Photo 8.22: Water containers lined up outside a house in Loma Bonita (Melanie Lombard)



In Moctezuma, where most houses have electricity and water and are generally bigger, these activities are less in evidence, either taking place inside or not at all, suggesting that outside space is used functionally when private space is at a premium, as in Loma Bonita. Patios are also often sites of conviviality, where family and friends gather to eat and talk. They are sometimes furnished with wooden or plastic chairs, and serve as a reception room when weather permits – I undertook several interviews on residents' patios, and also saw meetings being carried out on them. Outside space also provides a play area for children, for example with a swing (see Photo 8.23).

Photo 8.23: Children playing on swing in patio, Loma Bonita (Melanie Lombard)



Outside space is also important in aesthetic terms, evidenced by residents' efforts in gardening in these areas, and tending plants there. In Moctezuma, communal green spaces substitute gardens for many residents, and these are usually very well-kept: in the neighbourhood, there are at least three small public gardens, with neatly tended flowers (see Photo 8.24) and seating. At the scale of individual houses, it is very common to see plants in cans being used to decorate patios and other areas in *colonias populares*, even in the poorest households (as seen in Photos 8.7 and 8.9). Varley (2007: 17) sees the tradition

of abundant plants and flowers around the home in *colonia populares* as mirroring the 'rootedness' of ownership: they express the meaning of home as the basis from which residents 'can contemplate change in the future, for better or worse, with equanimity'. In Loma Bonita, while there is no 'official' green space, many respondents remarked on the abundance of greenery surrounding the neighbourhood, which they used for picnicking and playing. On one occasion when I arrived in Loma Bonita to look for a resident I had arranged to meet, I was told by local children that he was 'sleeping' in the woods bordering the neighbourhood. It soon became apparent that he and his wife were lying down together in a secluded spot, and did not want to be disturbed, much to my embarrassment.

Photo 8.24: Flowers in public space in Moctezuma (Melanie Lombard)



These uses of inside and outside space, in the home and the neighbourhood, indicate a blurring of the distinction between public and private spheres. Space which is at the interface of 'private' and 'public' (such as the immediate external space of a house) is used for private activities such as washing, but also public activities such as meetings; while public space may be appropriated for private activities such as sleeping, drinking and sexual relations, particularly if these are difficult to carry out at home. Children, family members and neighbours go in and out of houses and there seems to be less concern for private space, especially in Loma Bonita. In *colonias populares*, where privacy may be hard to come by anyway because of overcrowded houses with large families living in a few rooms, the public/private distinction may be more fluid. Feminist geographers have

challenged the simplistic binary of public/private space (e.g. McDowell 1998 in Williams, Meth and Willis 2009: 23), which also derives from specific cultural and social norms. Elsewhere, home has been seen ‘a porous, open, intersection of social relations and emotions ... neither private nor public but both’ (Blunt and Dowling 2006: 27). In this case, the neighbourhood itself could also be seen as ‘home’ place, the object of people’s place-making activities.

Place naming

Naming can be an important symbolic process relating to people’s identification with a place. One respondent told me that places names may reflect the community leader who organised the settlement process, a public official who had helped residents, or even the *ejidatario* who sold the land (Mauricio Vegas, 17.07.06). In Loma Bonita, the main street was named ‘Calle Licenciado Jaime Cisneros González’ after a local councillor who helped the community to obtain resources during its earlier stages. In Moctezuma, street names are derived from Aztec mythology, such as Quetzalcoatl, the Feathered Serpent, one of the most important creator gods. Other names, such as Quixpil, Xolotl, Xalitic and Popocatepetl give the neighbourhood a distinctive character (seen on the sign in Photo 8.25). Several respondents mentioned this as something unique about the neighbourhood, and attributed the place naming to residents, although respondents gave different accounts.

Photo 8.25: Sign in Moctezuma with street names (Melanie Lombard)



Olga, a resident of Moctezuma, described how she had arrived to visit her plot one day while she was still renting elsewhere, and had happened upon a meeting of officials in the process of naming streets:

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

The significance of this story is its assertion of residents' outright rejection of Hispanic and Catholic names in favour of indigenous ones: this could be a reflection of wider movements to reclaim the indigenous element of Mexican *mestizo*⁷² culture. It is also interesting to note that these indigenous names are more difficult for 'outsiders' to pronounce and spell, in contrast to the Hispanic names commonly used in the central areas the city, which normally derive from national heroes, Catholic religious figures, and commemorated dates. In this way, place-making can be seen in terms of resisting established societal and cultural norms. Returning to Friedmann's (2007) point, people make claims on space through activities such as naming and signifying, as well as taking part in social relations and recurrent rituals. Places, by being lived in, become humanised (Friedmann 2007: 259). These place-making activities which confer meaning on space could also be taken as symbols of resistance to the idea of dehumanised slums often depicted in discourses about informality. *Colonias populares*, characterised by 'nothingness' in local discursive constructions, develop their own identities through residents' place-making activities.

⁷² The term *mestizo* generally refers to the mixed race identity of 55 per cent of Mexicans (Heritage 2004). However, *mestizaje* has been described as a national assimilationist model in the context of Mexico's 'democratic transition' (Gledhill 2006), a tool in the service of nation-building.

This section has discussed ‘place meaning’, which is perhaps the most ephemeral element of place. It may be located in the sense of collective endeavour found in certain activities in *colonias populares* – including those at the household scale – which make these neighbourhoods a particular place. Architecture, home-making and place naming are all processes through which residents construct symbols of place, and emblematic of the individual and collective effort that goes into making their neighbourhood: in this way, they are part of the construction of place meaning. An imagined and material place is the expected end result of residents’ activities, and place meaning provides a useful lens through which to see the value and significance of these.

8.4 Conclusion

This chapter has explored elements of residents’ place-making, guided by the question, ‘How do residents’ place-making activities construct *colonias populares*, spatially, socially and culturally?’. It looked at how residents’ place-making activities construct location, locale, and place meaning, through physical, social and cultural practices. The creation of physical setting, or location, reveals that *colonia populares* are places in process, full of meaning relating to the residents’ aspirations to become part of the city. Through physical place-making activities such as building, residents express agency in terms of shaping their environment according to their own preferences, as well as determining the future of their neighbourhood. But place-making can also be seen as resistance, in the sense that residents’ activities are part of resisting negative or stereotypical discursive constructions of *colonias populares*.

This is not to shoulder residents with the ‘heavy theoretical responsibility’ (Varley 2008: 5) of overturning dominant power structures, or of revolutionising urban theory: rather, it is to suggest that in their everyday place-making activities, they are involved in constructing a place which is as much a part of the city as any other neighbourhood, through the ‘quiet encroachment of the ordinary’ (Bayat 2004: 90). ‘Normal’ social activities, such as religious practices and football, play an important part in this, as they provide links to the

rest of the city. Through signifying activities such as place naming, residents make place meaningful. These symbols are indicative of the neighbourhood's significance as a place in the city, but one defined on the terms of its residents, rather than on the basis of static categories such as 'informal', 'rural' or 'illegal'.

Seeing *colonias populares* through a place-making lens therefore offers an alternative to the dualistic categories that theories of 'informality' entail, and the marginalising, 'othering' effects of dominant discourses, by emphasising the dynamic nature of these places, and the agency of their residents in constructing them. The functional, social and cultural uses of space discussed in this chapter are elements of 'ordinary cities': they are urban practices which potentially take place in all areas of the city. A place-making approach therefore suggests thinking differently about urban informal settlements, emphasising the residents' stories of place – of hope, conviviality and home – at the level of policy, academic and local discourses. Reimagining urban informal settlements as 'ordinary places' means seeing them as part of the city, subject to the same complex relations and processes as other areas. This is not to gloss over the politics of place-making: as seen in Chapters Six and Seven, these activities are contextualised by conditions of necessity, discrimination and domination (as well as resistance). But by emphasising the often untold residents' stories, place-making is important in its representation of effort: it allows a rethinking of what these particular places in the city mean to the people who live in them, in terms of their social, cultural and physical input.

CHAPTER 9: CONCLUSION

Urban informal settlements are conceptualised in certain marginalising ways by influential discourses. This can contribute to their isolation, theoretically and materially, in conceptual terms and in the cities where they develop. Rather than being imagined as ordinary places, where residents' mundane everyday lives intersect with their dreams and future aspirations, they are all too often portrayed as harbouring squalor, decay and desperation. But these neighbourhoods contain diverse and multiple elements which contribute to their particular 'sense of place', the same way that any other neighbourhood in the city does. In this thesis, I set out to explore the problem of the potentially marginalising effects of discourses of 'informality' on urban informal settlements. My aim has been to critically examine understandings of urban informal settlements, in order to unsettle some of the assumptions these are based on, and to understand these places differently.

I have sought to do this through exploring complexity in situated cases of particular neighbourhoods with 'informal' characteristics, looking at their residents' lived experiences, and comparing these with information from other sources such as local policy, media, public opinion and interviews with local government and civil society representatives. In doing so, I have contrasted discursive constructions of *colonias populares* with the lived experiences of their residents, which may be shaped by, but are not limited to, the effects of these constructions. This focus was guided by ideas about 'place' from critical social geography, synthesised in 'place-making', which was used as an analytical lens in order to view the discursive, spatial, social, cultural and political factors which influence the development of urban informal settlements.

This chapter presents a conclusion to the thesis, returning to the themes set out in the introductory chapter, on the basis of the research findings presented in preceding chapters. The questions which guided the research were formulated on the basis of the theoretical framework set out in Chapters Two and Three, which is briefly revisited here in order to frame them.

The continued 'problematization' of urban informal settlements in influential academic and policy debates can have material effects on the residents of these places. Conceptions of urban informal settlements often rest on simplistic binaries, particularly the dualistic 'formal/informal' framework, which implies that formality and informality are fundamentally separate. The continued domination of this analytical separation in certain key debates means that urban informality is consistently seen as a category outside 'normal' urban considerations. Such dualisms often contain a normative stance, as they tend to be based on ideological underpinnings: so 'informality' is often conflated with poverty, illegitimacy, and disorder. These concerns have been used to justify policies of eviction and displacement of urban informal settlements, reinforcing existing spatial and social marginalisation for their residents, and denying them legitimacy in the urban context.

In response to this, I have argued for different ways of thinking about 'informality', which emphasise the fluid, dynamic nature of urban informal settlements, as constituted by social processes rather than static categorisations. Given its prevalence, this is not a call to do away with 'informality' as a category: rather, it is a suggestion that the idea should be critically explored and interrogated, in an attempt to re-imagine 'urban informal settlements'. This is not new as an idea in and of itself, rather, my scholarly contribution is located in the innovative intellectual approach, applying an idea from outside the usual debates on urban informal settlements (in the form of place-making) to interrogate them, and in this way allowing a re-thinking of certain issues, and illuminating other aspects, which are explored within this chapter. In this way, this thesis seeks to contribute to debates taking a critical approach to exploring relations between discourses and their marginalised objects (places and people).

Place-making was suggested as an analytical lens which emphasises 'place' as the site of lived experience, dynamic change and power. As the aggregate of many decisions over time, places are sites of creative social interaction which constructs them as meaningful. Processes which occur in and around a particular place, including residents' everyday activities, are fundamental to its constitution. But place-making can include discursive constructions of place through local policy, media, and public opinion, as well as wider

influences at national and international scale. My objective is to enable a renewed understanding of urban informal settlements as 'ordinary', in the sense that they have the capacity to be as creative, diverse and distinctive as anywhere else in the city. These ideas were explored in the context of *colonias populares* in Mexico.

On the basis of the above theoretical framework, the following questions were formulated to guide the research:

- How does the discursive, spatial, social, cultural and political construction of place through place-making occur in *colonias populares* in Mexico? How does this illustrate the limited understandings held about urban informal settlements?
- How are *colonias populares* discursively constructed as places in the city?
- How does local policy discursively construct *colonias populares*, and what are the effects of this?
- How do residents' place-making activities construct *colonias populares*, spatially, socially and culturally?

The research has been guided by the initial overarching research question. This question also guides the focus of this chapter, based on the analysis of the preceding empirical chapters. These were guided by the three subsequent, underlying research questions, as each empirical chapter explored one of these questions. Chapter Six examined local discourses as a form of place-making, using information gathered from interviews, participant observation and documentary evidence to analyse place-making through discursive constructions of *colonias populares* in Xalapa. Chapter Seven looked at a specific example of discursive place-making, the Municipal Citizen Participation policy, and compared this with perspectives from interviews and observation, as well as with other policy documents. Chapter Eight examined how residents' place-making processes interact with these perceptions of place in the wider city, based on interviews, observation, and

solicited photography. These methods were part of a qualitative, ethnographic methodological approach, based on a post-structuralist epistemology and critical social ontology.

The first three sections of this chapter discuss relevant aspects of the preceding analyses, and the fourth section reviews this discussion in the light of the final research question. The objective of this chapter is not to make generalisations about urban phenomena, but to draw some conclusions which have conceptual significance for relevant theories. This is reflected on in the final comments, which discuss implications of the findings for wider debates, and give some suggestions for future research.

9.1 The construction of informality

The idea of 'informality' has come to dominate certain key debates on cities in the global South, particularly in the disciplinary fields of development, urban studies and planning. 'Informality' is posited on the basis of a dualistic framework, which separates urban informal settlements from the formal, orderly city, and is freighted with normative evaluations. Through exploring how *colonias populares* are discursively constructed as places in the city, it was revealed that binary constructions are pervasive. Discursive constructions of *colonias populares* in Xalapa, where more than 50 per cent of the city's population live, often feature categories such as good/bad, rural/urban, clean/dirty, orderly/disorderly, planned/unplanned, worthless/valuable, citizen/settler, and so on. Furthermore, these places were often described in negative terms. They were seen by 'outsiders' of the neighbourhoods as the epitome of the city's 'dysfunctional' urban growth, which has brought far-reaching changes to the built and social fabric of the city. Their location on the edges of the city, often based on former *ejidal* land, means they are conceptualised as 'rural' in the sense of being 'backward' or anti-modern, in contrast to the 'urban' central areas, portrayed as advanced, modern and sophisticated.

These discursive constructions, found in the local context of Xalapa, seem to reflect and reproduce narratives from wider academic and policy discourses. Discourses may have

material effects, as seen in the consequences that ideas about legalising informally-held property (De Soto 2000) have had for poor urban residents, who have been subject to large-scale programmes of tenure regularisation (discussed below). In Xalapa, the effect of discourses can be seen in the portrayal of *colonias populares* as ‘another world’, distant and different from the rest of the city, which affects their residents through stigmatisation and discrimination by officials, public sector workers, and other citizens. *Colonia* residents feel they are seen by the authorities as a lower priority than other neighbourhoods in the city, in terms of service provision and attendance to their needs. However, ‘othering’ was also used by residents of the two case study *colonias* to distinguish their neighbourhood from areas which were perceived to be dangerous and insecure. This suggests the power of wider discourses to influence not just local policy and public opinion, but how ordinary urban residents think and feel about themselves and other urban dwellers, an issue which is returned to below.

Part of the problem seems to be that understandings of ‘informality’ often incorporate a normative, as well as a descriptive element. ‘Disorder’ is premised on the idea of ‘order’, and likewise, ‘informal’ depends on ‘formal’ for its existence. Setting up a polarised paradigm thus implies a normative vision of ‘how things should be’: for example, a ‘real’ neighbourhood, or ‘the good citizen’. This can be found in Xalapa local policy’s appropriation of residents’ forms of self-organisation in order to manage them according to certain pre-defined ideals. These places (and their residents) are expected to make the transition from one state to another: from ‘rural’ to ‘urban, from ‘settler’ to ‘citizen’, and so on. The discursive opposition which is set up between these real, tangible places, and the ideal type which they are supposed to aim for (but by virtue of being compared to, are the antithesis of) reproduces and reinforces the binary thinking found in academic and wider policy debates, on which these constructions of informality are based.

9.2 The power of discourses

The problems entailed by the spatial and social marginalisation of urban informal settlements, which include spatial isolation, discrimination, poor living conditions, and disconnection from the rest of the city, are serious and immediate, for their residents and the cities where they develop. Because of this, it is easy to understand why urban informal settlements are 'problematised' in certain ways. Most proponents of the somewhat apocalyptic depictions which have come to dominate media and policy discourses about them – epitomised by the reintroduction of the word 'slum' – are attempting to highlight the very real problems of poverty, exploitation and hardship that exist in these places, from a social justice standpoint. However, as suggested above, the reification of the assumptions on which theories of informality are based can have negative material effects for already marginalised residents.

This reification (i.e. treating an abstraction as if it were a thing, Shurmer-Smith 2002: 4) of ideas from wider discourses at the local policy level was evident in the research findings. For example, one resident of Moctezuma explained that there were two classes of citizens, based on a distinction between 'settler' and 'citizen', which seemed to reflect the hierarchy of citizenship set up by the Citizen Participation Bylaw. This indicates the potential power of ideas which circulate at the level of international academic debates and organisations to influence local policy and have material effects for urban residents. Mexico's regularisation programme, which is one of the largest and oldest in the world, was influenced by World Bank policies deriving from the work of De Soto (2000), who has been described as a 'John Turner for the 1990s' (Davis 2004: 79). In Xalapa, the influence of this programme is felt most strongly in *colonias* built on *ejidal* land, like Loma Bonita. My research revealed that the more stringent application of local-level regulations relating to these semi-legal transactions arguably led to the imprisonment of the neighbourhood's Block Leader, with negative effects for the neighbourhood's residents, who suffered from the organisational stagnation which resulted in terms of obtaining services, as well as the criminalisation of one of their residents.

However, local policy also serves as a point of reference for ‘unofficial’ practices and relationships which take place beyond its remit, and which play an equally important role in the context of *colonias populares* in Mexico. In the case of Moctezuma, the State Government’s creation of a Territorial Reserve and its distribution of land on a clientelistic basis could be seen as symptomatic of the widespread practice of manipulating housing need for political ends. The entangled power relations in these places, which usually contain elements of both domination and resistance, contextualise and influence place-making in these neighbourhoods. In Mexico, the three-tiered state and the fragmented nature of local government means that *colonia* residents often employ multi-pronged strategies of petitioning for services via formal channels, while simultaneously putting pressure on the Municipal Government with protests, and also engaging in other activities on a spectrum of legality ranging from contacting the local media to land invasions.

These unofficial strategies also indicate the complex nature of ‘the state’, which is intricate and multifaceted. My research showed that different actors within the realm of ‘the state’ expressed different attitudes towards the same place. The complexity of local government in Mexico means that processes can be contradictory: for example, different official positions within the same department could result in its pursuing a policy of ‘benign neglect’ towards *colonias populares*, while simultaneously prosecuting illegal subdividers. However, the research revealed that certain interests prevail, even in the context of entangled relations of domination and resistance. The Xalapa Municipal Government’s efforts to ‘set the rules’, through bureaucracy and sanctions, seem to be designed to manage ‘problematic’ areas, characterised negatively; and there seems to be a widespread perception among *colonia* residents that local authorities are more manipulative than supportive, perhaps reflecting a more generalised cynicism relating to Mexico’s corporatist political culture.

On the other hand, residents’ awareness of the politicised nature of relations in *colonias populares* meant they were also capable of taking advantage of this. Residents are often at a disadvantage in terms of resources: financially, but also relating to time (as many spend time travelling to and from jobs, or work long hours in the home) and influence (which may

depend on political affiliation or existing relations with government officials). But these constraints do not preclude their having agency: as informed actors, they are capable of making decisions and determinations about their own circumstances and those of their neighbourhood, albeit in restricted conditions. Moreover, just as 'the state' is not a homogenous entity, so the residents of a *colonia* are not a uniform, consistent set of actors, but rather a diverse group of individuals and families who happen to live in the same neighbourhood.

The reification of certain ideas in local level policy seems then to contribute to the discursive marginalisation of *colonias populares* in Xalapa, in a form of political place-making which also relates to activities beyond the scope of (but implicitly located with regard to) policy. On the other hand, residents' resistance to the negative effects of these discursive constructions, in terms of stereotyping and discrimination, can be found in their efforts to make a place for themselves in the city, captured in this thesis' analysis of their place-making activities.

9.3 The potential of place-making

The idea of using a place-making focus in my research was to move beyond the exclusive and normative categories often entailed by focusing on 'planning', or 'community participation'. As well as failing to account for activities at different scales (across household, neighbourhood and city levels), these categories often gloss over everyday activities in neighbourhoods, which may seem inconsequential, but play an important part in the construction of place meaning. Looking at how residents' place-making activities construct *colonias populares*, spatially, socially and culturally, the research found that place-making activities contribute to the construction of a location (physical place) and locale (material setting for social activities), which is also a meaningful place for residents. Moreover, these activities could be seen as a form of resistance to the effects of discursive constructions of place, and an assertion of residents' agency.

The potential of place-making as an analytical lens is twofold. Methodologically, it offers a different focus from that normally taken with regard to urban informal settlements. In particular, it captures the idea of 'place as process', which seems fundamental to the incremental development processes of *colonias populares*, but is often hidden by static or quantitative characterisations which tend to classify a place as 'poor', 'illegal', etc. This is at odds with the way residents of these neighbourhoods talked about them in my research: their responses suggested an aspirational and forward-looking view of their *colonias* as places in process. Similarly, seeing 'place' from a critical social geographic perspective means focusing on the power to determine place meaning – and hence who places are for, and what can be done in place – opening up the possibility of subversion of these expectations.

It is in this sense that I argue that residents' place-making can be seen as resistance: by constructing their own meaningful location in the city, they are resisting the isolating and discriminatory effects of the discursive constructions which circulate through policy and other local discourses such as media. As Cresswell (2004: 39) puts it, place is the 'unstable stage for performance ... constantly struggled over and reimagined in practical ways'. Through elements such as place names and vernacular architecture, residents attach meaning to place. In this way, they create their neighbourhood as a unique place in the city: but one which is defined on their terms, rather than on the basis of static categories such as 'informal', 'rural' or 'illegal'. On the basis of 'normal' social activities such as religious practices and football, which provide links to the rest of the city, these neighbourhoods are also being constructed as 'ordinary places' by their residents. Furthermore, through furnishing themselves with shelter and services they can't access otherwise, residents are also resisting their economic marginalisation.

Analytically, place-making also offers a more fruitful perspective on urban informal settlements than views which focus on legal or technical categories. Suggesting that place meaning is a discursive construction opens the way for different understandings of the same place. As Massey (1991) points out, there is never one single sense of place even within the same neighbourhood, given the multiple viewpoints of the actors involved. For example, in

my research, the association of 'rural' qualities with disorder contrasted with the views of the residents, who saw the 'rural' aspect of their neighbourhood, based on its greenery and tranquillity, as an advantage, while simultaneously asserting that the neighbourhood was in fact 'urban' in many ways, as part of the city. This seems to suggest that different actors involved in place-making in the same location may effectively be making different places: the place that is being made is conceptualised differently by the people involved in place-making. This also implies that among residents there may be different 'senses of place', just as among agents of the state there may also be variation: but the research also suggests that there is some sense of collective endeavour involved in the residents' efforts to achieve a common goal (for example service provision), expressed through their readiness to collaborate as individuals and households.

Place-making also offers a different way of conceptualising the productive (in the social and cultural, rather than economic, sense) activities of residents in urban informal settlements, which are often ignored, devalued or misrepresented in academic and policy discourses. The Xalapa Citizen Participation policy does acknowledge this to a degree, in that it makes residents responsible for activities such as service provision (which should arguably be the responsibility of the authorities), while simultaneously appropriating existing structures of resident self-organisation, as part of the rhetoric of democratisation and decentralisation. However, place-making emphasises the productive effort of residents not just in physical terms of housing or services, but in the social, cultural and political construction of a place, in the context of the city of which it is part.

The analytical lens of place-making therefore emphasises the residents' efforts and allows a rethinking of what these particular places in the city mean to the people who live in them, in terms of their social, cultural and physical inputs there. The incorporation of a phenomenological approach in this analysis means that the socio-spatial dimension of place is prioritised, and a focus on lived experience is paramount, allowing emphasis on the residents' stories, which are often excluded or marginalised. Urban informal settlements are frequently dehumanised by quantitative or economic representations in academic literature, and the materialities of life there are obscured, leading to their depiction as places full of

squalor and despair. The objective of a place-making approach is to avoid binary thinking, allowing instead a view of these neighbourhoods as rich, complex places in the city.

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

9.4 Place-making in urban informal settlements

The aim of this thesis (and in particular, this chapter) has been to answer the question, ‘How does the discursive, spatial, social, cultural and political construction of place through place-making occur in *colonias populares* in Mexico? How does this illustrate the limited understandings held about urban informal settlements?’. Using place-making to explore urban informal settlements has offered a distinctive methodological and analytical focus in an area which is often dominated by marginalising discourses. So far, the discussion in this chapter has focused on three main ideas that the research findings have revealed:

- Binary discursive constructions of urban informal settlements are found in local discourses about *colonias populares*, and can be seen as a form of place-making.
- These binaries are reified in policy, in the context of power relations, with potential material effects for the residents of these places.

- Residents' place-making in *colonias populares* can be seen as expressing agency, which in turn suggests resistance to binary discursive constructions, illustrating their problematic nature and limited scope in terms of understanding the places they describe.

These findings suggest that different, more nuanced understandings of urban informal settlements are needed. Place-making offers a means for this, as well as for critically examining existing understandings. In particular, place-making revealed new interpretations of certain issues, such as the contrast between residents' and 'outsiders'' perceptions of urban informal settlements. Place-making is carried out by a variety of agents in *colonias populares*, with the focus provided by a particular place. Given that different place meanings exist for the same location, actors carrying out place-making activities in the same locale may be constructing different places. This has implications for power relations which are explored briefly here.

Local authorities' place-making activities, which reflect the binary discursive constructions of these places found in policy and academic discourses, can have isolating and marginalising effects. These official place-making activities seem to be directed at: managing those 'disorderly' places; making them 'better' places; and maintaining stability (especially important in the Mexican context), often in the interest of particular actors. In this case, the local government is involved in constructing citizens, in the context of informal (and therefore illicit, devalued and manipulable) place. But while policy can be seen as a form of dominating power in this way, domination always entails 'resistance'; and the complexities of government mean that certain actors may attempt to 'assist' these places and people in certain ways (even while 'developing' them), meaning not all official place-making practices are necessarily negative for residents of *colonias populares*.

Meanwhile, I argue that although residents are aware of these discursive constructions of place, their place-making activities are not necessarily directed towards the same ends: they understand these places differently. These are their home places, and as residents, they are

intimately involved in making them: therefore, the residents are making a different place to the one that the authorities are making. Even though they are all focusing on the same location and locale, different actors see place meaning differently: residents are doing their best to work within the context of local authority policy, and sometimes to resist it (although sometimes to comply with it, which may or may not be in the settlement's collective interest). Again, resistance always entails domination, and it cannot be assumed that residents are always or exclusively oppressed: but by dint of living in these places, and place-making there, they are making a 'home', a place in the city. Finally, in the context of the particular city of which they are part, these places are discursively constructed as 'disorderly', in association with certain narratives, including being blamed for the city's perceived overall deterioration.

The implications of this for theories of informality are related to the material effects that these discourses may have on perceptions of place and place meaning. On the basis of the findings outlined above, it can be seen that discourses of informality do not just describe urban informal settlements, but affect the way that they are perceived. The potential material effects of this show that current theories of 'informality' are not only inadequate, but also possibly harmful: they are often too limiting in terms of imagining the city. The potentially marginalising effects of discourses mean that theorising about urban informal settlements should be accompanied by constant vigilance regarding the effects of discursive constructions. In particular, the homogenising tendencies of discourses of informality mean that more situated and subtle ways of understanding urban informal settlements as places should be considered. Certainly, constant critical examination of concepts is necessary, to ensure that between conceptualisation and application, the diverse mix of lived experiences contained within urban informal settlements does not get lost or corrupted.

In the light of the power of discourses, seen here in the reification of certain ideas at the local policy level, it seems evident that any perspective on urban informal settlements must be aware of the marginalising potential of relevant debates, and maintain a critically reflective perspective. This might extend, for example, to a review on the part of

international organisations and academics using the term ‘slum’, in the light of its implications and effects, as evidence by ensuing demolition and eviction policy in some countries.

Final comments

The introductory chapter of this thesis set out the problem of generalising about the multitude of low-income, self-build neighbourhoods that develop on the margins of legality in many cities of the global South. However, there are critical issues at stake relating to the marginalisation of ‘informal’ areas in the urban context; and these issues are as relevant as they have ever been, if not more so. Certainly, Mexico’s continued high levels of urban development through ‘informal’ processes indicates that there is a pressing need to better understand how and why these places are created and function. In the context of the recent ‘global financial crisis’, manifestations of ‘urban informal settlements’ have been detected in the richer countries of the global North, including the United States (e.g. Burkeman 2009). ‘Informality’ is not going away, then, and some terminology is needed to discuss the issues around it, including to critically reflect on how they are discussed. Given the centrality of the concept of ‘informality’ to debates in the urban context of the global South, it seems futile to call for the term’s rejection or replacement. This is not to argue that language is not important – debates about the ‘return of the slum’ in development discourse underline its centrality – but to suggest that a focus is maintained on the wider issues at stake, which are how ideas and terms are used, in a critical or less critical way.

One of the key implications of this for theories of ‘informality’ relates to the usefulness of some of their underlying assumptions. Based on my research findings, it seems that binary categorisations are not always adequate to describe or understand the processes and relations which constitute the neighbourhoods discussed in this thesis. These places are neither rural nor urban: they may contain a mixture of both (or alternatively may be regarded as outside these categories altogether). Similarly, they contain elements of both formal and informal processes. Neither of these observations are new in the context of urban informal settlements, but they are relevant, given the continued prevalence of binary

and normative categorisations. The tendency for these ideas to be used unthinkingly in local discourses seems to be a factor in the 'othering' and isolation, discursive and material, which these neighbourhoods are subject to in Xalapa. My research has shown that these places are as much a part of the city as anywhere else, albeit operating under certain constraining conditions which must also be kept in mind. However, it seems necessary to consider alternative ways of thinking about or imagining the city, in order to move beyond simplistic dualisms in the context of 'informality'.

My concluding suggestion, then, is less for a binary critique of informality (*either* 'informality' is used *or* it is rejected), and more for an appreciation and awareness of the dynamic tensions contained within ideas about 'informality' (a place can be *both* informal *and* creative, productive and so on). This suggests a rethinking of the normative inference which often underlies these categories. In particular, I am arguing for the need to retain a sense of the complexity of urban informal settlements, while suggesting that they can and should be better understood in the urban context where they develop.

Ultimately, in this thesis I have tried to make a case for a more nuanced debate around the issue of urban informal settlements. A focus on place-making has revealed that often, place meanings are understood so differently as to lead to the imagining and creation of different places in the same location. This finding may aid understanding of the often conflicting and contradictory interpretations of these neighbourhoods in the city where they develop. A more critical understanding of theories of urban informal settlements might better account for this, through giving increasing prominence to the residents' stories. Furthermore, in order to counter the marginalising effects of discourses, these stories need to be continually returned to, in an effort to imagine the city as a collective resource (Healey 2002). This is not to take a romanticised view of residents' lived experiences; but it is to argue for their (re)insertion into discourses at all levels, whether academic, policy or local, and thus into the idea of the city. It is also to argue for maintaining an awareness of the complexity of these places, which are neither good nor bad, urban nor rural, formal nor informal, but 'ordinary' neighbourhoods in marginalised circumstances.

Future research directions

On the basis of the above discussion, it is suggested that future research priorities should include a continued emphasis on the stories of urban residents – both those of marginalised neighbourhoods, and from other parts of the city. In particular, there seems to be little qualitative research on the interaction of discourses and perceptions in the wider city with materialities of life in urban informal settlements, and this could be a rich source of future understandings of cities of the global South. Given the constraints of time and resources, a longitudinal study was not possible in this case, but such an approach would add another dimension to future research. The current dearth of research on marginalised urban areas in Latin American cities coming out of the UK, compared to the flurry of activity of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, suggests a need for renewed interest in this area. Particularly interesting issues for further exploration are the material effects of different place meanings on marginalised neighbourhoods and in the city: for example, what implications do conflicting place meanings have for these places, their residents, and the wider city? There is also a notable lack of research on municipal Citizen Participation policy in Mexico: work in this area could provide a link between development and planning literatures.

A further strand of future research on urban informal settlements might involve operationalising Robinson's (2006) suggestion to see cities as 'ordinary'. To this end, comparative studies between neighbourhoods and cities of the global North and global South, as well as within countries of the global South, might offer different perspectives. This approach is already being tried out by some urban theorists (e.g. McFarlane 2008), but so far it has not extended to the Mexican urban context. The aim in carrying out such research would be to try and ensure that, as argued in this thesis, when seeking to understand urban places – wherever they are based and whatever their particularities – a consistent critical, but empirically-driven, gaze is maintained. As researchers, we would do well to recall an idea from a different time and context, the relevance of which resonates here and now:

The selfsame sun that shines upon his court
Hides not his visage from our cottage, but
Looks on alike.
William Shakespeare *The Winter's Tale* (1560)