ORIGINAL COPIES?
Imitative Design Practices in Informal Settlements

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Abstract
Although limited by economic constraints, builder-dwellers in informal, self-made environments are free to choose housing forms and materials without external constraint or control. This situation potentially offers considerable freedom for expressive gestures, originality and individuality. Drawing on data from a longitudinal ethnographic study in Colombia this paper explores how dwelling forms and practices are characterised by imitative behaviours at a range of scales including settlement layouts, house plans, selection of materials and house furnishings. The main arena for competitive display and distinction is on the front facades of the dwellings where variations in colour and form become increasingly evident as settlements consolidate. The paper utilises Bourdieu’s concepts of distinction and cultural capital to explore the changing dynamics of housing design and display, and to explain why as dwellings consolidate, there appears to be an increasing divergence between dwelling forms and domestic practices.

Keywords: Informal housing design; competitive display; cultural capital.

INTRODUCTION: REPRODUCING POPULAR HOUSING
In much of urban Latin America the ‘barrios populares’ - literally neighbourhoods of the people – are places of aspiration and change; change in which the self-builders demonstrate considerable agency manifest in the ambition, ingenuity and energy with which they attempt to realise their individual and collective aspirations – to transform their social position within society. The construction of their owner-built dwellings is usually a decades-long project of consolidation. It is a powerfully symbolic and transformative process in which the physical construction of the dwelling – usually from a flimsy improvised hut of recycled materials – towards a solid dwelling of concrete blocks, paint and railings, plays a fundamental role in transforming social relationships and personal identity in which imitation appears to play a key role.

Imitative practices take place in different ways. Imitation is a fundamental part of the processes of cultural transmission as social groups attempt to reproduce themselves. Much of this appears to occur 'unconsciously' or 'naturally' and is embodied in everyday practices (Bourdieu, 1977) as children learn the social rules, behaviours and language of their parents and elders through copying and repetition. Houses play a crucial role as the site of many of these everyday social practices which are continually reproducing and reinforcing the social order. Other issues are overtly reinforced through formalised processes such as education, which historically has employed copying techniques and repetitive rote learning.

In this case imitation is a part of the process of change as people are observing and apparently copying the dwellings of others in clear attempts to raise their own social status. Are these low-income dwellers merely imitating the forms of more prestigious housing areas rather than adopting its norms and values? Can we distinguish between superficial copying and ‘genuine appropriation’? What exactly is being copied? Is it the form, the content, the image or the lifestyle? Can these characteristics be separated?
To address these questions we need to explore the intentions, motivations and logics that lie behind different practices. To do this the paper draws on data from a longitudinal ethnographic study into the growth and development of popular housing in the Caribbean coastal city of Santa Marta in northern Colombia. I first collected data in 1986 and returned every few years until the early 1990s each time living with a family in one of the illegal squatter settlements on the periphery of the city. Several short visits were made in the late 1990s and in 2008 I carried out a follow up study when I lived for another month with the same family. This was 17 years since the previous intensive fieldwork, and over 22 years since my first visit. The core of the study is an analysis of the changing dwelling processes and practices of 40 households in two adjacent settlements. From my vantage point as a participant observer I collected a range of data including long transcribed interviews with householders and detailed plans of their changing dwellings accompanied by photographs (Kellett, 2000; 2011).

CONSTRUCTING ORDER
Many authors have emphasised the symbolic dimension of housing and identified the need to explore the meanings associated with the buildings, spaces and objects that make up domestic environments (e.g. Bourdieu, 1977; Lawrence; 1987; Rapoport, 1982). Waterson (1997:xvii) explains that houses and settlements are full of encoded meanings and that the house can be seen a microcosm which reflects ‘in its layout, structure, and ornamentation the concept of an ideal natural and social order.’ Similarly Bourdieu’s concept of habitus can be interpreted as a way ‘of knowing the world, a set of divisions of space and time, of people and things, which structure social practice. It is at once a division of the world and a vision of the world’ (Dovey, 2010:32). In this sense dwellings play a central role in the reproduction of social order and practices.

In Santa Marta we can interpret the actions of land invasion, settlement and consolidation as processes of ordering. In this case the spatial order, which is created by the informal dwellers, is highly visible and identifiable at various scales. The most obvious is the formal, geometric layout of the settlement, but we also find a similar consistency in the house plans and even in the position of furniture within the dwelling. Let us look more closely at some of the elements, firstly the settlement layouts.

FORMAL PLANNING in INFORMAL SETTLEMENTS
Since colonial times urban areas in Latin America have been planned using orthogonal principles based on grid-iron layouts of standard blocks (Garcia Fernandez, 1989; Hardoy, 1982). This can be interpreted as the imposition of an ‘ideal’ social order through rigid planning which makes tangible in built form and space the power and value system of those in authority (Hernandez & Kellett, 2010). Perhaps ironically then, informal settlers aim to achieve just such a standard layout, sometimes overriding the logic of topography. The most vital aspect of the grid layout is that it will be read as conventional, and have the potential to develop and become the same as other parts of the city. The expressed aim of many settlers is to produce places that are as close as possible to the dominant formal housing areas. Hence they adopt the rigid layout of blocks and plots – and significantly they leave open spaces for squares, schools, clinics etc. In short, their collective aspiration is to create conventional, legal, fully serviced neighbourhoods.

Similarly, the design of the dwellings themselves echoes the same underlying geometric logics with minimal variation. Well-established patterns of development are followed at different speeds, but the end products fall well within a relatively narrow band of culturally prescribed characteristics. This means that dwellers are attempting within the constraints of their resources to create urban form and housing areas that are as close as possible to the dominant conventions. The informal dwellings and settlements can therefore be interpreted as striving to achieve formal respectability, conventionality and order. Such processes appear to be based on imitation and copying of dominant referent models.
ASPIRATIONAL JOURNEYS
A distinctive characteristic of informal settlements is that the dwellings are built by the inhabitants at the same time as the space is inhabited. This finds immediate echo in the ideas of Heidegger who emphasised the inseparability of construction and habitation, of building and dwelling. He argued that “building isn’t merely a means and a way towards dwelling – to build is in itself already to dwell” (Heidegger: 1971:144). He explains that in both German and English the words have a shared etymology (Sharr, 2007:39) which confirms the existential importance of building to help ground and centre us in the world.

Such an approach also challenges the assumed ‘dichotomy between design and execution’ as both emanate from a dwelling perspective (Ingold, 2000: 186). Hence the creation and construction of the dwellings is a lifetime project of change and improvement which is highly responsive to changing domestic circumstances, budgets and opportunities. This emphasises the idea of the house project as a process of change through time, a process in which the changing dwelling can be seen as a symbolic vehicle of transformation towards different circumstances. This can be interpreted as an aspirational life journey from poverty towards prosperity, from the past towards the future, from exclusion towards inclusion and from the margins towards the centre (Kellett, 2005). Such an analysis sees the house and house project as a classic ‘model of the world’ (cosmos) which is understood as an ongoing journey rather than a static cultural model. It also reinforces the idea of the dwelling as never complete but ‘continually under construction’ just as life itself is continually moving forward (Ingold, 2000:172).

This can be clarified through an example. I first met Olga, Jesus and their young children occupying a simple wooden hut high on the hillside a week after a land invasion in 1991. The change over 17 years from their temporary dwelling of discarded planks to their solidly built dwelling is a considerable achievement, and they have also managed to consolidate their economic position and educate their three children. Here is part of Olga’s story which she recounted in an animated way with both great pride in what had been achieved and also considerable enthusiasm for what was still to be done:

“Yes what an improvement! What happiness! To have your own house isn’t wealth, but not to have a house is certainly poverty. [...] Ay, in the beginning it was very hard for us, without electricity - we had to use mechones (improvised all lamps) and then what was it? - bringing up the water – we carried it on our shoulders and from right down there and each cantina holds 22 litres and you had to put that on your shoulder. [...] Yes it was tough. We all made such an effort, even the little ones. Everyone helped to carry up the stones and sand. The little ones carried up the sand in little buckets. [...] yes, when you build your own house you feel real affection for it. Are we happy with what we’ve achieved? Well yes, but we have to keep on improving it, of course! That’s my intention, yes. Yes it’s necessary to improve, it’s still basic construction (obra negra) – finish it, plaster it, paint it, the window in the kitchen, tile the kitchen and bathroom, plaster everywhere until nothing remains in obra negra. [...] we do it bit by bit. Apart from one room and the bathroom, everything we did ourselves, and it’s work, work.”

The front facade of the house is freshly painted and the living space is dominated by numerous framed educational certificates and graduation-style photographs of the three children. Despite the elaborate academic garments in some pictures these achievements do not go beyond secondary education apart from some short technical courses. However the message is clear. Their children are successful in educational terms and the household has thereby accumulated significant cultural capital of which they are proud. This message of achievement is visible to all who come to the dwelling. The certificates are distributed around the main living space and placed to ensure maximum visibility.

IMAGINED FUTURES
A common thread in such stories is the dogged persistence required to keep moving forward despite the hard work and hardships. The future dimension is crucial. The long-term nature of the process demonstrates that, in contrast to the common myth, dwellers are not present time
focused. They adopt forward looking strategies based on optimism and aspiration, and their
dwellings embody future aspirations with little time for nostalgia or a rural past, rather a
fascination with 'modern', urban, progressive images: a striving towards 'imagined futures'
(Holston, 1991). Despite daily hardships and injustices, the world is seen as a place of
opportunity and where effort and initiative can be rewarded. It is a worldview in which change and
modernity are welcomed and attainable. Such values are directly reflected in the aesthetics of
building in which models of success are sought from ‘beyond the neighbourhood in space and
away from the past in time’ (Peattie, 1992:28).

What appear to be essentially physical changes not only symbolise progress and
achievement but embody more fundamental social and economic changes. The mass
consumption of materials and consumer goods through the construction and furnishing of
dwellings draws dwellers intimately into capitalist cycles of consumption, and parallel changes in
social identity occur as people's role and position within society is redefined. Social positioning
plays a vital role in determining their actions. Informal settlers are conscious of their relatively low
social status, which is reflected, in their physical conditions. Hierarchies of forms and materials
which mirror economic and class divisions, are a very visual and public barometer of relative
social position and hence are an obvious platform for all those with any means (however minimal)
and aspiration (however unrealistic) to influence perceptions of where they fit, both on the larger
macro scale of society and simultaneously at the micro-level of neighbourhood relations. We can
see these as performative acts – with the aim, not necessarily consciously, of communicating to a
range of possible audiences, largely those nearby. Simultaneously it can be argued such actions
are also part of complex processes of self-realisation and identity (re)construction (Cooper
Marcus, 1995; Wiesenfeld, 2001). In other words communication is both inward and outward.

Therefore their construction efforts to transform their settlements can be partly interpreted
as a striving for dignity, respect and respectability through appropriating images and attributes
which signify aspects of ‘the modern’. From her personal experience of living in an informal
settlement in Venezuela, the anthropologist Lisa Peattie (1992:29) concluded that the improvised
wooden dwellings with minimal infrastructure ‘represent attributes which are devalued and
devaluing. People who live in this way are thought of as people to be looked down on. That is
why the energy that goes into housing improvement ... is as much a drive for respect as it is for
domfort.’ Such energy and values are manifest in the aesthetics of the built environment in
multiple ways, but underlying them is the desire to transform their own self-image as well as
project a new identity to others. This is well expressed by Holston with reference to his study of
self-builders in Brasilia where ‘the underclasses are constructing images and identities to counter
those that subjugate. Not only are they transforming themselves as citizens ...they are also
changing the images of disrespect [and] replacing [them] with new ones of competence and
knowledge in the production and consumption of what modern society considers important’

DESIGN MODELS: ORIGINALS AND COPIES
What are the sources of these new images of competence and modernity? In this study the
language of aspiration is expressed using a vocabulary borrowed from dominant groups to which
the informal dwellers aspire: a language of order, formality and affluence. Knowledge and
imagery of elite groups is easily accessible, not least through the media – especially television.
This is reinforced by local role models, which are clearly significant influences on the design
vocabulary, evident in the visual similarity between well-consolidated popular dwellings and
middle-class houses. However it is not a direct appropriation, not least as life styles and housing
preferences of all groups are continually evolving and changing. The recent development of new
gated communities and apartments favoured by the aspiring middle-classes in Santa Marta can
be seen as following the housing patterns of the capital Bogotá - which is looked up to as a place
of power and wealth. These changes also help to define the social distance between them and
the majority in the popular settlements in Santa Marta who are busy constructing dwellings, which
appear to be increasingly similar to their own. Therefore there is an apparent delay in the appropriation process: squatters are appropriating somewhat dated models.

An additional point of reference in the city relates to the large influx of internally displaced people (IDPs) fleeing extreme violence in rural areas. In 2008 it was estimated that at least 18% of the population of the city were IDPs and the ICRC (2007: 19) give a figure of almost 70,000 registered IDPs, making Santa Marta the fourth largest receiving city in the country. Many are erecting new dwellings on previously untouched steep slopes – some close to the city centre and on the hills surrounding existing settlements. Conditions are usually very difficult and 65% are living in ‘extreme poverty’ (ICRC, 2007: 30). These new urban dwellers are changing the relative hierarchy of housing types and conditions in the city. Established informal dwellers are no longer at the bottom of the social hierarchy and are keen to ensure that they are clearly differentiated from those below them. They do this not only through continuing to build in solid materials, but through careful attention to style and detail.

Housing types and styles have clear symbolic functions (Miller, 1987) and in Santa Marta these dynamic processes of change and appropriation can be interpreted as reflecting changing social ideals. Following Bourdieu (1984) we can see how different social groups attempt to maintain distinction from those ‘below’ them and simultaneously try to emulate those they consider to be successful. Foster (1975: 180) suggests that the type of dwelling built by the poor is ‘an economical copy of a more wealthy man’s house.’ But although they may appear similar they are much more than a simple copy. Drawing on data from Brazil, Holston (1991) argues that low-income dwellers are not attempting to imitate, but rather to develop ‘original copies’ which display both their origin as well as demonstrating sufficient uniqueness and originality. This seems to be the case here.

**DEFINING DIFFERENCE, REINFORCING SIMILARITY**

We can interpret aspects of the visual appearance of the dwellings through an appreciation of transient and transcendent values (Miller, 1994) and an understanding of the imagery associated with contrasting rural and urban values. The barrio is on the edge of the city with hills and farmland close by and many older residents grew up in rural areas, but the countryside is regarded as backward and lacking in opportunity and prestige. The pitched roof is symbolic of the rural house and great effort and expense is expanded in disguising its presence. Most consolidated dwellings appear to have flat roofs, which are associated with the urban houses of the rich and a key signifier of modernity. This illusion of flatness is achieved by erecting a parapet or fascia at the front eaves. Such ‘modern’ exteriors reflect transient, changing values and are designed to demonstrate prestige and link the occupiers with urban based ideas of affluence and progress.

Once the front façade is sufficiently advanced it will be rendered and painted. Bright colour is a recent addition to the armoury of those intent on achieving distinction from their neighbours through expressing visible difference. However, a delicate balance is required between difference and similarity: between uniqueness and conformity. A common, shared vocabulary is frequently evident between neighbours and which also indicates its imitative origins in the dwellings of the more affluent.

We can identify two levels of imitative behaviour. Firstly, copying from the design models of the more affluent beyond the barrio for the generic design patterns, and secondly within the barrio. Dwellers recognise that they observe and appropriate selectively the designs and motifs of neighbours which they believe express the values to which they themselves aspire. Again sufficient uniqueness can be achieved by the careful use of paired colours (rarely more than two colours are used). This is a self-conscious design process with the intentional selection of ideas and patterns (Ingold, 2000:175).

Although some people were not especially forthcoming when asked to explain their choices and preferences it is clear that low-income residents hold clear aesthetic preferences and participate with knowledge and creativity in the design process. I devised a simple photo-
elicitation exercise to encourage people to discuss their preferences using a range of images of different façade types, and found that invariable the same ones were selected as being the most attractive and ‘better’. These all employed a clear symmetrical geometry combined with decorative elements in the fascia profile and railings. I included some older images and it was revealing that facades which appeared to be prestigious in 1991 were not selected. In recent years styles are becoming more colourful, extravagant and playful – as well as occasionally eccentric. There is a noticeable softening of the hard modernist geometry and increasing use of floral based decoration and occasional use of textured areas (e.g. pattern stones). This confirms that tastes and trends are in a state of flux and suggests that a more popular aesthetic is developing which appears less reliant on copying and places more emphasis on originality. Increasing numbers of recent facades exude a confident and playful exuberance (figure 1).

Fashions and styles are inevitably changing but this new found confidence in popular architecture may be an indicator of more profound changes and suggests a more independent relationship with elite groups and practices. In a study of cities in the highlands of Ecuador, Klaufus (2012: 263) explains how the potency of dominant models is linked to underlying systems of power, and illustrates how ‘the former elite architecture is losing its distinctive quality; the barrier constructed by the elite between superior and popular culture is fading. The elite symbols have forfeited some of their strength.’ This reminds us that architecture is not independent of structures of power but is fully implicated in configuring societies through the construction of realities and symbolic meanings.

![Figure 1: Three dwellings in the settlement. Increasing levels of consolidation are visible on the facades. The house of Nancy and Leopold is on the left. (Source: Author).](image)

FRONT RAILINGS: A CASE STUDY

A very visible feature of more consolidated dwellings is the presence of high front railings. They range in design from simple vertical bars to railings which incorporate playful floral patterns. It appears their ‘function’ is one of security – but in many cases the door and windows also have security bars. Why then the need for outer railings? Here is an extract from an interview with Nancy (N) and Leonardo (L) whose house is well consolidated (Figure 1, left image). The interior is smart and in excellent condition (they re-decorate each year) with expensive shiny floor tiles and good quality furnishings. Nancy works as a maid for a middle-class household and Leopoldo as a petrol pump attendant. I asked them what they were planning to do next on the house:

L We’re going to do the front terrace and the fascia. Yes a terrace in ‘material’.

P Many people have done that I think, not least in this street.

N Yes, yes, in this street. In this street lots of people have done it.

P So that’s the next thing. It’s a bit difficult isn’t it?

L Yes, yes it’s difficult, quite difficult.

N And that’s because it costs such a lot. Yes a lot because of all the (building) materials.

L And also we want to put in railings. Railings. I’ve always wanted to have railings.

P Why do you want railings?

N More security, to have more security.

L For more security, at least to be more secure, at least...
P  But is there a problem of security here?
N  No, no, very little.
L  No, no problem, not really... but to have more security at least when you go out.
N  Here it's very tranquil. At least in all the [24] years we have lived here we've never had any problem. Here we even leave the house unattended ... we've left the house alone for several days. And we've never had, never had any problem. We've never lost anything. Because here it's very safe (seguro). Here you don't see [problems like] that.
P  But (with railings) you would feel better?
L  Yes you feel better, more secure.
N  More secure, yes but also it would make the house look much more attractive (vistasidad). Because here you can get some railings which are very pretty (bonita), and it would be like adding more luxury (lujo). Then the facade of the house would look prettier. It's like making it more attractive and special.
L  ... but more security too, for when you go out or anything ...

There appear to be several levels of explanation. Firstly, the bars are part of an aspirational language. They are emblematic of success and an essential final touch in the production of a completed house, one that will demonstrate beyond doubt that the inhabitants have transformed themselves from homeless squatters into prosperous citizens. In addition to the high cost of such railings, why have such security if you have nothing worth stealing? When burglary increased middle-class households began to fit railings (and other security features) which are now regarded as essential design features for those with money. They are outward symbols of inner wealth (or ambition to become wealthy). This is reinforced in the final paragraph where Nancy explains how they can be used not only to make the house more visually attractive but also to add 'luxury'. Luxury is synonymous with surplus.

Secondly, the vehicle chosen to express such aspirations is inevitably related to what others are doing. Bourdieu's ideas of distinction (1984) are based on clarifying both difference from those 'below' and similarity with those 'above'. It is worth noting that Nancy and Leonardo are at the end of a row of four houses on the same side of the street all of which have elaborate facades with railings. Such close juxtaposition makes comparison inevitable.

Finally, the bars provide a sense of security. One of the most fundamental functions of the home is to protect the occupants and offer a sense of calm, stability, refuge and wellbeing - 'a place of security in an insecure world' (Dovey, 1985:46). This security may be achievable through physical means, but more significantly it is a state of mind to which various factors may contribute. Although Nancy and Leopoldo have confirmed they have no need to protect their home from thieves and burglars, there is a generalised climate of violence and fear throughout the country including the coastal region (Carmago Rodriguez & Blanco Botero, 2007). They may have no need of physical protection but they appear be interpreting the tangible presence of the metal railings as offering psychological reassurance from the violence and insecurity which surrounds them. The greater the perceived insecurity, the more important such mechanisms may be.

We are seeing here how buildings and particular objects play 'an active role in the constitution of social [and] cultural identities, and vice versa' (Vellinga, 2007:761). Just as social identities are in state of change and flux, so too material objects 'acquire different, changeable, contradictory, and often contested meanings, at different times and in different contexts.'

DUAL VALUE SYSTEMS

Although the streets remain unpaved the majority of dwellings are now constructed in solid materials, many painted in lively colours. Such improvements appear to be accounted for by a linear model of dwelling consolidation intimately integrated with social aspiration. Predictably, some households are more successful than others, and the differences become more evident over a longer time frame. To the observer there is increasing evidence of ordered layouts, consistent house plans, furniture types and positions.
If we were to apply the functionalist logic of (physical and spatial) form following (social and cultural) function then such consistency and order might suggest an equally ordered and disciplined social world. The reality is very different. The *barrio* is far from cohesive with an absence of clear and effective community organisation. Although the majority of households in my sample have been remarkably stable over the 22 year period of study, there are others which reflect the pattern of unstable relationships and consensual unions which are frequently reported as distinctive throughout the Caribbean region (Streiker, 1993, 1995, 1997). Although there is some variation, behaviour and lifestyles can be characterised as relaxed, informal and flexible. How can we explain this persistent inconsistency between physical order and informal social practices? Why is there such a strong contrast between the attempts at creating a clear geometric order and the flexible, informal patterns of social interaction?

This apparent disconnect between the formal language of the dwelling and its furnishings and the value systems and behaviour of the residents suggests we need to analyse further the actual usage of domestic space and objects. The house can be interpreted as a microcosm of significant cognitive categories (Bourdieu, 1977), but the danger is that we read the dwelling container and its interior furnishings and objects at face value. “*It does not suffice just to look at the objects: one must also study who uses them, and how and when they are used. The meaning which materialises in the organisation of objects in space can only be discovered through associated practices... which may be expected to reveal the same cognitive schemes as the objects in space*” (Gullestad, 1993:129-130).

On closer inspection of the dwelling practices in Santa Marta, it seems there are two apparently contrasting systems of values and practices (habitus) operating simultaneously: one which is flexible, moveable, informal and closer to rural practices while the other is more rigid, fixed and formalised and fits within the aspirational model sketched out earlier. Each set of values seems to have its own physical manifestations, spaces and attendant goods but I would argue that they do not operate in isolation but rather in a state of ambivalence and creative tension.

This can be clearly seen with reference to furniture which signals activities and behaviours which do not take place. On entering most well-consolidated dwellings you will find a suite of chairs, sofa and coffee table near the front door with dining table and matching chairs in a standard position between the sitting area and the kitchen. Such furniture arrangements appear to define clear activity settings (Rapoport, 1982). We would expect visitors to be received and entertained in the lounge area and for meals to take place as a household sitting around the dining table. But the reality is very different. Lounge seats are rarely used – most visitors (including myself) are entertained on the front terrace or in the rear patio sitting on cheap plastic chairs; and food consumption lacks any of the formality and domestic ritual associated with shared meals and implied by the dining table and chairs. Eating is not a collective activity. Food is consumed at different times and in different places and is usually eaten quickly without much conversation. I never witnessed a complete family sitting round the table for a meal together. This is significant, because food choice, preparation and consumption are fundamental indicators of cultural value and social categories (Mintz & Du Bois, 2002; Levi Strauss, 1983).

There seems to be an increasingly clear divergence between forms and everyday practices. The dwelling forms, spatial arrangements and many domestic objects adopt a language from beyond the barrio, but it is a language, which offers a point of reference against which the dwellers define their own practices. This language is from a world of power, influence, affluence and order, and people aim to appropriate wherever possible such tangible representations of this order. They are literally re-constructing such an order, but not directly for their own everyday habitation. Using Goffman’s (1969) terms, it is rather like a play: the stage is set for a particular scene, but the actors are acting out a different performance – one which comes more naturally to the extent that they are no longer acting, but simply ‘being themselves.’ These everyday embodied practices (habitus) appear to belong to a more deep seated set of values which are closer to the sensual elements of the earth and ground, the world of air and...
The natural world from which it might appear people are retreating: each time the house gets bigger the patio gets smaller.

We can see this played out in the tension between the house and the rear patio. The house appears to offer a visible and tangible representation of control and order - the straight line culture of the house contrasting with the subversive, 'chaotic' sensuality and fertility of the natural world: the patio with its ripening fruits and birds – emblems of desire and freedom. The dweller may attempt to impose a calm, cool, mechanical order within the house, but for many the patio is irresistible, with its natural breeze and infinitely flexible spatial arrangements. Where chairs can be moved in and out of the shade and a hammock strung between the trees.

According to Douglas (1966:3), the order for which people are striving and which is enabled by the 'positive re-ordering of the environment' (in this case through dwelling construction) is an attempt to make it 'conform to an idea …it is a creative movement, an attempt to relate form to function, to make unity of experience.' But in this case it is not the unity we might imagine. The key value of the dwelling is as symbolic capital, as a material manifestation of progress in the journey of social aspiration and recognition. The unity may perhaps lie in a symbiotic inverse relationship with everyday domestic practices in which the natural world of the patio, and the flexible characteristics of the plastic chair, co-exist with the hard, immoveable presence of the house.

CONCLUSION: DIVERGENCE OF FORMS AND PRACTICES

Such evidence confirms the central importance of the house as a dynamic 'model of the world' understood as an ongoing journey. This is a journey in which imitation and appropriation play a key role in the formation of new identities through construction practices. The imitative practices observed appear to be related largely to visible spatial forms and physical objects: settlement layout, dwelling plans, building materials, type and location of furniture etc. The meanings that are appropriated are vital for the construction and consolidation of progressive identities for the informal dwellers – but their everyday domestic practices appear to remain rooted to a deeper set of values. Hence it is largely the forms but not the practices which are imitated or borrowed.

This suggests that the new, borrowed 'language' does not displace the old – rather that an uneasy bilingualism is constructed – in which the different languages are used by different speakers on different occasions depending on the audience(s). Nothing is static; both languages are in a continual state of flux. Forms and practices, meanings and values are intimately interrelated in dynamic, unpredictable ways which are highly conscious of what others are doing. Lifestyles and dwelling forms external both in time and space to the popular settlements, provide points of reference: sometimes copied directly, frequently adjusted but rarely it seems adopted as a total package linking forms to practices.

We must be cautious of claims, common in the field of architecture, of causal relationships between forms and behaviour, for example the space syntax ideas of Hillier & Hanson (1984). Such formal determinism in which particular forms are believed to govern certain spatial behaviours with implicit values can lead to erroneous and superficial conclusions. As we have seen, dwelling practices are complex and do not necessarily correspond to the specific forms and spaces to which we might assume they are allocated. Such findings confirm the value of detailed ethnographic work in teasing out the subtlety and complexity implicit in dwelling practices, social values and meanings.

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