

# Peripheral urbanization: Autoconstruction, transversal logics, and politics in cities of the global south

Environment and Planning D: Society and Space



2017, Vol. 35(1) 3–20

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DOI: 10.1177/0263775816658479

[journals.sagepub.com/home/epd](http://journals.sagepub.com/home/epd)**Teresa PR Caldeira**

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**Abstract**

Many cities around the world have been largely constructed by their residents, who build not only their own houses, but also frequently their neighborhoods. In this article, I use the notion of peripheral urbanization to analyze this way of producing cities that is quite pervasive in the global south. I argue that peripheral urbanization refers to modes of the production of space that (a) operate with a specific temporality and agency, (b) engage transversally with official logics, (c) generate new modes of politics, and (d) create highly unequal and heterogeneous cities. I also argue that peripheral urbanization not only produces heterogeneity within the city as it unfolds over time, but also varies considerably from one city to another. I build my arguments by juxtaposing dissimilar cases from a few cities in the global south. To focus on peripheral urbanization means simultaneously to de-center urban theory and to offer a bold characterization of modes of the production of space that are different from those that generated the cities of the North Atlantic.

**Keywords**

Autoconstruction, peripheries, transversal logics, urbanization in the global south

Many cities around the world have been largely constructed by their residents, who build not only their own houses, but also frequently their neighborhoods. They do not necessarily do so in clandestine ways and certainly not in isolation. Throughout the process, they interact with the state and its institutions, but usually in transversal ways. While they have plans and prepare carefully each step, their actions typically escape the framing of official planning. They operate inside capitalist markets of land, credit, and consumption, but usually in special niches bypassed by the dominant logics of formal real estate, finance, and commodity circulation. In the process of house/city building, many make themselves into citizens and political agents, become fluent in rights talk, and claim the cities as their own. In this article, I refer to this mode of making cities as *peripheral urbanization*.

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I use the notion of peripheral urbanization to create a problem-space that allows us to investigate logics of the production of the urban that differ from those of the North Atlantic. I use it as a means of exploring processes of both socio-spatial formation and theory making. My intention is to go beyond the deconstruction of Northern-originated accounts of urbanization articulated by a now long stream of critiques<sup>1</sup> and, in response to Mbembe and Nuttall (2004: 352), work with new archives to offer a bold characterization and theorization of a mode of the production of space that is prevalent in cities of the global south.

Many authors have worked with notions of peripheries and peripheral urbanization to analyze cities in the global south. I work in conversation with them and cite many of their works throughout this article. At the core of my contribution are two arguments. First, I argue that peripheral urbanization consists of a *set of interrelated processes*. It refers to modes of the production of urban space that (a) operate with a specific form of agency and temporality, (b) engage transversally with official logics, (c) generate new modes of politics through practices that produce new kinds of citizens, claims, circuits, and contestations, and (d) create highly unequal and heterogeneous cities. Second, I argue that peripheral urbanization not only produces heterogeneity within the city as it unfolds over time, but also *varies considerably from one city to another*. Thus, as a model, peripheral urbanization must remain open and provisional to account for variation and for the ways in which the production of the cities it characterizes is constantly being transformed.

It is important to stress that peripheral urbanization does not necessarily entail the growth of cities towards their hinterlands. In other words, *it does not simply refer to a spatial location in the city—its margins—but rather to a way of producing space that can be anywhere*.<sup>2</sup> What makes this process peripheral is not its physical location but rather the crucial role of residents in the production of space and how as a mode of urbanization it unfolds slowly, transversally in relation to official logics, and amidst political contestations.

I definitely do not claim that peripheral urbanization is the only mode of the production of urban space operating in cities of the global south. Nor do I claim that there is a unified model of “Southern urbanism.” In fact, the very different cases I analyze below demonstrate the opposite, i.e. that peripheral urbanization unfolds in quite different ways. What I do claim is that peripheral urbanization is remarkably pervasive, occurring in many cities of the south, regardless of their different histories of urbanization and political specificities. I also claim that it is necessary to understand peripheral urbanization as a set of interrelated processes to formulate not only better analyses and theories, but also better urban and planning practices.

I build my arguments by juxtaposing dissimilar cases from a few cities in the global south. I rely extensively on my own long-term investigations in São Paulo alongside other cases of peripheral urbanization. I have chosen the latter for the following reasons. First, they have been carefully analyzed, mostly by scholars based in these cities. Thus, they represent new archives, bringing to the discussion robust knowledge produced from non-North Atlantic perspectives. Usually, these studies circulate within the national context in which they are produced but are not engaged by either Northern scholars or researchers working on other parts of the global south. To engage these studies, breaking their national barriers and their isolation from the north, is a necessary step to create urban theories that can account for modes of urbanization whose logic is different from that of the industrial cities of the North. It is to take seriously the idea of thinking with an accent (Caldeira, 2000: Chapter 1). Second, they are very different from each other, their histories are well known, and their singularities can be clearly contextualized, thus allowing me to consider how different histories may lead

to similar outcomes. Third, these cases indicate important transformations in processes of peripheral urbanization, pointing to different futures.

I conceive of my analysis in terms of juxtaposition, a kind of comparison. Several scholars have insisted on the importance of comparison in urban studies, especially as one moves away from North Atlantic models.<sup>3</sup> The main reason to choose juxtaposition is to emphasize the qualitative logic that anchors my approach, a logic standard among anthropologists and ethnographers. To work with the *juxtaposition of dissimilar cases* means to use difference and estrangement as modes of analysis and critique, a perspective that can be traced back to the practices of the European artistic avant-gardes of the early 20th century, and later to the critique of anthropology in the 1980s (Clifford, 1981; Marcus and Fischer, 1986). This use of juxtaposition operates with a qualitative (analytical) logic that is at odds with a statistical one used by many comparativists (Small, 2009; Yin, 2002). It does not look for the representative, typical, similar, or repetitive. Instead, it proceeds inductively, exploring the differential and internal conditions of cases, looking for a wide range of variation, and aiming at saturation (Small, 2009). The juxtaposition of dissimilar, located, and historicized cases brought together to illuminate one another destabilizes unexamined views and generalizations and opens up new possibilities of understanding.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, in what follows, I juxtapose analyses of Istanbul, Santiago, and São Paulo (with additional considerations about Mexico City and New Delhi), exploring their different configurations to anchor my arguments about peripheral urbanization. I first analyze each of the four interrelated dimensions of peripheral urbanization and then discuss some of the ways in which they have been transformed recently. Throughout the analysis, I build a model based on the exploration of differences, insisting that although we can identify processes of peripheral urbanization in many cities, each iteration is particular and should be analyzed as such. The challenge of the analysis is thus to develop a model, peripheral urbanization, that articulates general features while remaining open and provisional to account for the ways in which the modes of operation it characterizes vary and constantly transform.

## Agency and temporality

Peripheral urbanization involves a distinctive form of agency. Residents are agents of urbanization, not simply consumers of spaces developed and regulated by others. They build their houses and cities step-by-step according to the resources they are able to put together at each moment in a process that I call *autoconstruction* (following the Latin American term for it). As Holston (1991) has also shown, each phase involves a great amount of improvisation and bricolage; complex strategies and calculations; and constant imagination of what a nice home might look like. Sometimes residents rely on their own labor; frequently, they hire the labor of others. Their spaces are always in the making. Thus, peripheral urbanization also involves a distinctive temporality; homes and neighborhoods grow little-by-little, in long-term processes of incompleteness and continuous improvement led by their own residents. Peripheral urbanization does not involve spaces already made that can be consumed as finished products before they are even inhabited. Rather, it involves spaces that are never quite done, always being altered, expanded, and elaborated upon.

Cities are obviously always being transformed. But peripheries change according to a logic of their own: slowly, progressively, unevenly.<sup>5</sup> For long periods of time, people inhabit spaces that are clearly precarious and unfinished, but with the expectation, frequently realized, that the spaces will improve and one day look like wealthier parts of the city. Peripheral landscapes are marked by constructions and remodelings, resulting in a combination of houses and infrastructure of quite different levels of completion and

elaboration. Older areas are better off; newer areas are more precarious in terms of infrastructure, services, and the characteristics of individual houses. As a result of this pattern, peripheral urbanization produces quite heterogeneous landscapes.

The transformations are simultaneously expressed in the conditions of the urban space and the houses. As the neighborhood grows and the population increases, streets are paved; water, electricity, and sewage arrive; and local commerce expands. With time, façades are improved, houses are enlarged, and, especially, spaces are constantly redecorated. Despite indisputable precariousness and persisting poverty, the processes of transformation of peripheral areas offer a model of social mobility, as they become the material embodiments of notions of progress.<sup>6</sup>

As peripheries improve, however, they may become inaccessible to the poorest residents. Thus, peripheral urbanization is a process that is always being displaced, reproduced somewhere else where land is cheaper because it is more precarious or difficult to access. This presents methodological challenges for the study of peripheral urbanization. To capture its temporality, it has to be studied over time. To capture its continuous reproduction, it has to be studied across space. This is especially clear in Ahonsi's (2002) analysis of Lagos Duhau's (2014) of Mexico City, and Holston's (2008) and my own (Caldeira, 2000) of São Paulo. Studies looking at one place miss the lateral reproduction of peripheries, getting only the picture of improvement, if focusing on an older area, or precariousness, if focusing on a newer one. Peripheries have to be studied over time *and* across space. It is only by doing this that one can capture the simultaneous processes of improvement and the reproduction of inequality and precariousness.



**Figure 1.** The autoconstruction of Jardim das Camélias, São Paulo. Pictures taken from the same terrace over a 35 year period. Photos by the author.

## Transversal logics

Peripheries are spaces that frequently unsettle official logics—for example, those of legal property, formal labor, state regulation, and market capitalism. Nevertheless, they do not contest these logics directly as much as they operate with them in transversal ways. That is, by engaging the many problems of legalization, regulation, occupation, planning, and speculation, they redefine those logics and, in so doing, generate urbanizations of heterogeneous types and remarkable political consequences. Cities that have undergone peripheral urbanization are usually marked by significant spatial and social inequality. Nevertheless, because of these transversal engagements, inequalities cannot always be mapped out in simple dualistic oppositions such as regulated versus unregulated, legal residences versus slums, formal versus informal, etc. Rather, these cities exhibit multiple formations of inequality, wherein categories such as ‘formal’ and ‘regulated’ are always shifting and unstable. Thus, one needs to set aside the notion of informality (and the dualist reasoning it usually implies) and think in terms of transversal logics to understand these complex urban formations which are inherently unstable and contingent.

Peripheries are improvised. But the fact that there is a significant amount of improvisation does not mean that they are either totally unplanned and chaotic or illegal and unregulated. Peripheral urbanization does not mean an absence of the state or planning, but rather a process in which citizens and governments interact in complex ways. While residents are the main agents of the production of space, the state is present in numerous ways: it regulates, legislates, writes plans, provides infrastructure, polices, and upgrades spaces. Quite frequently, though, the state acts *after the fact* to modify spaces that are already built and inhabited.

Many peripheral and autoconstructed spaces involve a substantial amount of planning. Nezahualcóyotl or Ciudad Neza in the Mexico City Metropolitan Region, for instance, was built on a perfect grid, as were many other peripheral areas all over Latin America. In the 1960s, it was laid out by a developer as 150,000 uniform but irregularly parceled out housing lots that were then built up by individual residents (Duhau, 2014: 151, 1998: 145–146). In fact, countless neighborhoods in peripheries have been laid out and sold by developers acting according to clear plans and legal standards. In general, however, their creation, commercialization, and development involve several layers of irregularity—sometimes quite difficult to untangle—and many turns of negotiation between all the agents involved in the process, including the state. In the case of the Mexico City metropolitan region, a common source of irregularity is the creation of urban developments on *ejido* land—i.e. land that, distributed to landless peasants to hold in common after the Mexican Revolution, is illegal to sell, lease, or rent.<sup>7</sup>

There is broad agreement in the literature about housing in the global south that both irregularity and illegality are the most common means through which the poor settle in and urbanize cities. Frequently, illegality and irregularity are the only options available for the poor to become urban dwellers, given that formal housing is not affordable and public housing is not sufficient. The conditions of irregularity regarding land tenure and construction vary widely.<sup>8</sup> They range from swindling of private property to lack of official permits; from corruption in the allocation of communal land to failure to follow municipal codes; from disputes over parceling of tribal land to the appropriation of ecologically protected areas for private constructions. In addition to irregularities related to land, there are others associated with construction. Autoconstructors and developers try to follow city ordinances and regulations but usually do this unevenly. In spite of the fact that there is a good amount of irregularity regarding land tenure, land use, and construction in peripheral areas, they are neither necessarily illegal nor invaded. Although there are many

squatter settlements in peripheral areas built on invaded land,<sup>9</sup> a significant proportion of autoconstructors actually pay for and have claims to their lots. In São Paulo, for example, 80% of peripheral residents have legitimate claims to property ownership (Holston, 2008).

Legality is a complex issue, however. James Holston (2008) shows that, in Brazil, illegality is a common condition of the urbanization patterns of the poor because it is a dominant means of rule in general, not because the poor have a tendency to marginality and precariousness. Moreover, when there is illegality, it is usually not because the residents have taken land that is not their own, but rather because they have been swindled by developers or because legislative changes have made illegal what used to be acceptable. Tuna Kuyucu (2014) shows that, in Istanbul, the use of legal ambiguity and administrative arbitrariness by public and private actors has been fundamental for the constitution of a private property regime that anchors a capitalist market of land and the displacement of *gecekondu* settlements.

Whatever the case, what these and other studies demonstrate is that the legal status of neighborhoods built by peripheral urbanization is frequently subject to transformation. Residents bet on the possibility of legalization and regularization and most frequently either succeed in seeing it happen or live with the consequences of ongoing irregularity. Thus, there is a temporality related to legalization as well. In the early 1970s, Nezahualcōyotl was the object of the first large-scale land regularization project by the Mexican federal and state governments (Duhau, 2014: 151). Now, most Latin American countries have large programs for the regularization of urban land and the question of land policy is central to the research agendas of several institutions (Smolka and Mullahy, 2010). However, studies have also shown that the state itself is responsible for the creation and re-creation of irregularity and illegality, as it passes laws and master plans that alter the status of lands and buildings, making the irregular into the regular and *vice versa* (for Delhi, see Bhan, 2016). A single zoning law can render a whole area irregular or legalize it overnight. Obviously, these shifts engender intense political struggles, as they involve immediate repercussions in terms of the profitability of real estate and the dislocation of residents.

Processes of regularization help to illuminate both the constant exchange between autoconstructors and the state and the logic of planning that it embeds. São Paulo's case illustrates this point. During the period of largest expansion of the city in 1950–1970, private entrepreneurs laid out developments in distant areas, leaving vast stretches of empty land between new developments (Caldeira, 2000; Camargo et al., 1976). They created dirt roads and bus lines to connect to the city the new settlements, usually irregular, that they sold to workers trying to avoid exorbitant rent. The expectation of both residents and developers, almost always realized, was that the state would follow up and install the necessary infrastructure. When this happened, developers began to sell the land they had initially bypassed, benefitting from the valorization brought about by the improved infrastructural conditions and previous urbanization. The same happened as a result of governmental programs of land regularization/legalization. These practices initiated cycles of land development/regularization/valorization that entangled the state, investors, and citizens. In the process, state planners and agencies acted routinely after the fact in a way that benefitted private developers, improved neighborhoods, and consolidated the rights of residents. We can recognize the same logic in programs of land regularization and slum upgrading.

Finally, the transversal logics of peripheral urbanization appear in the modes of consumption and credit. Autoconstruction involves substantial consumption related to the acquisition of both building materials and appliances, furniture, and decorative items. But autoconstructors typically lack access to credit from institutions, such as banks and the state, to finance the acquisition of land or construction of homes. There is credit, but it comes from

developers, merchants, and popular department stores, usually with very high interest rates. Everything happens in a kind of alternate market that specializes in the needs of the urban poor and bypasses some dominant official logics. Maintained in this market, urban land and housing remain relatively cheap and accessible.

## **Experiments in politics and democracy**

The perennially shifting conditions in the peripheries, and their accompanying configurations of both improvement and the reproduction of inequality, have entangled the agents that produce urban space in complex political relationships. Peripheral urbanization generates new modes of politics through practices that produce new kinds of citizens, claims, and contestations. These politics are rooted in the production of urban space itself—primarily residential urban space—and its qualities, deficiencies, and practices (Caldeira, 2015). The unstable conditions of tenure, the skewed presence of the state, the precariousness of infrastructures, the exploitation by developers and merchants, the constant abuse of residents by the institutions of order, and several processes of stigmatization and discrimination against residents make peripheries spaces of invention of new democratic practices. Sometimes, the political relationships that develop in these spaces are quite clientelistic. In many other cases, however, they become what James Holston (2008) calls ‘spaces of insurgent citizenship’. In many parts of the world, social movements and grassroots organizations from peripheries have created new discourses of rights and put forward demands that are at the basis of the rise of new citizenships, the formulation of new constitutions, the experimentation with new forms of local administration, and the invention of new approaches to social policy, planning, law, and citizen participation (Holston, 2009). They have also metamorphosed over time and been an important presence in the protests that have filled the streets of several cities in recent years, such as Istanbul (El-Kazaz, 2013; Tugal, 2013), São Paulo (Caldeira, 2013, 2015), and Cairo (Ismail, 2014).

These movements have certainly generated changes in the everyday lives and qualities of urban space, as they have forced their improvement. But they have also produced deep political transformations. They have taken the materiality of spaces of inhabitation to anchor movements that create new political subjectivities and expose the inequalities that sustain the reproduction of peripheral urbanization and the limits of dominant political arrangements. In the process, they have also opened new spaces of experimentation that have substantially transformed the character of the public sphere in their societies.

## **Heterogeneity**

Thus, peripheral urbanization is a process through which residents engage in modes of production of space that constitute themselves as simultaneously new kinds of urban residents, consumers, subjects, and citizens. Areas produced by peripheral urbanization are dynamic, creative, and transformative, as AbdouMaliq Simone (2004, 2010, 2014) has insistently demonstrated. These engagements, however transformative they may be, obviously are not able to erase the gap that separates peripheries and their residents from other spaces and social groups—a gap that has been constantly recreated and frequently increased, both in terms of the disparity of quality of urban spaces and the income and resources of social groups. Peripheries are, undoubtedly, about inequality. They are poor, precarious, discriminated against, and frequently violent. Nevertheless, they are not homogeneously poor and precarious; and usually are much better than they were in the past. Their inherent dynamism and pattern of transformation complicate accounts of socio-spatial inequality.

Over time, peripheral urbanization generates heterogeneous urban spaces. This is especially clear in Latin America, where this mode of producing the city has been prevalent for over 50 years. Several studies demonstrate that, as they grow and improve, the social and spatial heterogeneity of peripheral neighborhoods gradually and persistently increases. But because each area has a dynamic of its own—and because service and infrastructure reach them at different times and depending on various conditions, including the level and persistence of political organization of their residents—the result is that what used to be relatively homogeneous areas 50 years ago are now quite heterogeneous. São Paulo is a good example, as demonstrated by the contrast between an analysis produced in 1977 by Seplan, the Secretary of Economics and Planning of the State of São Paulo, and two recent analysis using data from the 2010 census by Nery at NEV/USP (2014) and Marques (2014). While the Seplan study revealed a homogeneous and vast periphery, the more recent studies reveal a city that is a kind of patchwork.

Since at least the middle of the 20th century, peripheral urbanization has offered poor residents of metropolises of the global south opportunities to inhabit these cities by maintaining alternative markets and spaces in which housing and urban life are precarious but affordable. Although this mode of urbanization continues to prevail in several cities, in others it is starting to show its limits. Simultaneously, some governmental interventions in the housing market intended to expand low-income housing have both increased the availability of housing for the poorest and affected the dynamics of autoconstruction. In the second part of this article, I discuss some cases that point to transformations in processes of peripheral urbanization. I am guided by the following question: what conditions permit the continuing improvement of peripheral urban spaces while simultaneously preserving the ability of the poor to inhabit these spaces and the metropolises they build? It seems that two conditions are fundamental: the strong organization of residents and the engagement of states that are compelled to commit to principles of social justice.

### **Creation of new land markets**

Let me start with Istanbul. While it is a textbook case of peripheral urbanization, it also clearly exemplifies the current trend towards the erasure of the types of space and housing built over the last half century through autoconstruction.<sup>10</sup> As the population of the city increased exponentially starting in the 1950s, new migrants were incorporated through a double mechanism – employment and housing – which entailed their integration in local social and political networks. Migrants arriving in the city settled in what became known as *gecekondu*. These squatter settlements were built in what were once distant but are now centrally located areas of the city. The settlements were illegal, since they were typically invasions of what used to be public land. As the new urbanites settled in these areas and constructed their houses step-by-step, they engaged in networks that simultaneously enhanced their chances of getting a job, provided a local basis of support, and ultimately guaranteed the legalization of their lands. This happened especially from the 1970s onwards, when populist regimes organized these neighborhoods, exchanging votes for the provision of infrastructure and land titles. As a consequence, explains Keyder (2005: 126–127), ‘the lifecycle of a squatter neighborhood was such that after a few elections it could become an area of multiple-storey apartment buildings... Urban politics was the natural arena in which immigrants engaged; they elected and supported politicians who could credibly promise local returns. Migrants became citizens through their allegiance to the space of residence’.

This story of success, however, also had contradictory effects. As those who had occupied public lands obtained titles of either private ownership or user's rights (*tapu tahsis* deeds; see Kuyucu, 2014: 10), a good amount of land that had been kept outside of the capitalist market was incorporated into it. The first consequences of this shift were felt by newer generations of migrants to the city. Unable to find easy land on which to reproduce the same process of peripheral urbanization, they became renters in the two- and three-story buildings owned by the earlier generation of migrants. This brought about a significant antagonism between the two groups, changing the social dynamics in *gecekondu* neighborhoods (Balaban, 2011; Keyder, 2005).

But this comprised only the first wave of commodification of land in Istanbul. The second and more aggressive, which has come more recently, is still unfolding. As Istanbul has joined the ranks of cities with plans to become 'world-class', and as the pressure from real estate developers for access to land has increased, the state has abandoned its previous tolerance for the occupation of public land and its practice of privatizing this land in electoral negotiations. Instead, it has actively contributed to the destruction of these areas and their transfer to private developers. Several processes are involved. On the one hand, land is now sold for a profit to bigger developers in a process of enclosure of urban space (Balaban, 2011), property transfer (Kuyucu and Ünsal, 2010), and population displacement. Moreover, as upscale high-rise developments radically change the landscape of the city, developers arrive at the old *gecekondu* areas to buy out the residents of desirably located neighborhoods.

But there are other and more aggressive modes of conversion of *gecekondu* areas. A crucial one, backed by new legislation, consists of large state-led projects to designate these areas as 'urban transformation zones' to be cleared for the sake of conversion to other high-end and high-profit uses. This designation allows state agencies to relocate *gecekondu* families to housing in more remote areas. Analyzing the unfolding of these transformation zones, Kuyucu (2014) brilliantly shows how flexible and ambiguous modes of land occupation are transformed into legal property to be used for real estate development through processes that operate by exploiting legal ambiguity and state arbitrariness embodied in the new legislation. Although conversion in this case clearly legalizes the illegal, as is common in processes of peripheral urbanization, now the legal conversion no longer benefits autoconstructors, who are forced away from the areas they have previously occupied.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, peripheral urbanization in Istanbul has assured the social mobility and integration of one generation of migrants. If for a moment this incorporation was guaranteed by a configuration that kept urban lands outside of a strong capitalist market and the state on the side of new poor urbanites, the transformation of this arrangement—the state's unwillingness to pursue popular housing alternatives, promotion of projects to displace available *gecekondu*, and stronger push for the incorporation of land into an upscale real estate market—are not only transforming and destroying old peripheries, but also constituting a new regime of private property (Kuyucu, 2014) and making urban land inaccessible to new migrants, who either become renters or squat in more remote areas, reproducing the periphery elsewhere. The protests of 2013 expressed in important ways the culmination of citizens' dissatisfaction with these 'urban transformations' and the project of city they embed (El-Kazaz, 2013; Tugal, 2013).

Although I do not have space to analyze other cases of the constitution of land markets, I want to mention that New Delhi shows tendencies strikingly similar to Istanbul (Bhan, 2016; Ghertner, 2015). In Delhi, as in other metropolises of the global south, processes such as evictions of previously accepted settlements; enclosure or privatization of public or commonable land; the aggregation of urban land in periurban fringes, sometimes through

violent means, and its incorporation into formal property markets; and the use of state force to clear land for private development undermine the possibilities of the continuation of peripheral urbanization. These processes provoke market-driven displacements and foreclose alternative markets and spaces for housing the poor.

### **Expansion of social housing**

The case of Santiago, Chile, another metropolis shaped by peripheral urbanization, also reveals deep changes in this mode of the production of space. In particular, it has been transformed through repression and the adoption of neoliberal policies that have made Chile into a 'best practice' case for the provision of social housing. Thus, while strong state interventions are at the basis of these changes in practices of peripheral urbanization, they are quite different from those in Istanbul. In Santiago, peripheral urbanization was not stopped by either interventions in markets of private property or ambitions of world-class status, but rather by a type of state policy, initiated by the military regime, that transformed housing for the poor into an affordable commodity (although of very low quality) to be acquired legally in areas supplied with services and infrastructure.

While Santiago grew immensely in the second half of the twentieth century, like Istanbul and São Paulo, its rate of population growth has slowed to less than 1% per year.<sup>12</sup> It is no longer a precarious city, as distribution of urban infrastructure, from water to sewage to electricity, has become basically universal. In the 1960s, the occupation of public land in distant areas was the predominant mode of access to housing for the poor, and the government did not take long to improve these areas. The government of Eduardo Frei (1964–1970) initiated large programs of land regularization and housing construction, which were intensified by socialist president Salvador Allende (1970–1973). Organized invasions of public land multiplied and both governments 'increased their support of the organized poor for squatting operations' (Salcedo, 2010: 94) at the same time as they tried to accelerate housing production. Thus, during this period, the state was sympathetic to peripheral urbanization and acted in favor of legalizing the illegal, improving infrastructure, and supporting the organization of the new urban residents, who became important political forces sustaining the regime.

Expectedly, the scenario changed radically with the establishment of the military dictatorship in 1973. Social movements were severely repressed and land invasions came to a halt. The military regime decided to stop illegal occupation of land and treat housing as a private matter to be addressed by the market. Unable to ignore the housing deficit, however, it adopted a model in the mid-1970s based on capital subsidies and the production of low-income housing by the private market. The government started giving capital subsidies to families, ones who could prove that they were poor but able to save, and directing them to housing units built en masse by private real estate developers. It also started to produce houses to be built 'progressively' by owners. This meant building rudimentary bathrooms and kitchens and asking the owners to do the rest, in a kind of officially organized autoconstruction. The goal of this program was to eradicate illegal occupations by providing legal and serviced housing. Years later, this program would become the model supported by the World Bank and other international agencies (Gilbert, 2002: 311).

Ironically, though, the best results of this neoliberal program were obtained after democratization in 1990, when the model was perfected to reach the poorest sectors of society, which had originally been ignored by it. In this new version, houses were completely subsidized and families would receive the title deed for free, with no bank loans to repay (Salcedo, 2010: 95). The state also intensified the production of housing for the

poorest sectors. The program became a huge success and is indicated as one of the main factors that helped the proportion of poor people in the Santiago Metropolitan Region drop from 33% to 10% between 1990 and 2006 (Rodríguez and Rodríguez, 2009: 15). In 1990, the housing deficit in Santiago was significant; around 20% of the population lived in shantytowns. Through the new housing policies, however, more than a million Chileans have moved from shantytowns to new housing units where they have become property owners (Salcedo, 2010: 90). Even critics of the policy agree that the majority of the poor (at least 80%) are now legal property owners and only around 1.5% of the population continues to live in shantytowns (Salcedo, 2010: 91). As one study puts it, home ownership today is ‘the minimum decent condition’ (Salcedo, 2010: 111).

However, the narration of this success story in the recent literature comes with an enumeration of problems. One of the most obvious is intensified spatial segregation, as the new housing complexes for the poor have been built disproportionately in distant localities and away from jobs. Additionally, apartments are very small (less than 40 m<sup>2</sup>), poorly constructed, and isolated, causing residents to complain bitterly. The literature analyzing the new housing borrows the imagery from a well-known dystopian repertoire to describe spaces of anomie, deterioration, mental illness, lack of sociability, drug addiction, alcoholism, and violence (see Ducci, 1997). One interesting finding of these studies, however, is that residents who moved to houses and were able to transform them are relatively happy. Many managed to transform even apartment units by expanding into common areas or adding improvised balconies. Real discontent exists among those who cannot transform their units and feel trapped in residences for which there is no clear real estate market. What is missed is the possibility of autoconstruction.

The Chilean case shows a clear intervention of the state to solve the housing deficit for the poor and change the character of peripheral urbanization. This intervention is hybrid. Although it started as a neoliberal policy to create property owners who bought residences produced by private developers for the market, its decisive success came from modifications provided by a state with a strong commitment to eradicating poverty and reaching the poorest who had otherwise remained at its margins. Chile is not the only country to have taken decisive steps to enlarge the social capacity of the state and reinvent its social welfare system. Many others—from Costa Rica and Colombia to South Africa, Mexico, and Brazil—have borrowed directly from Chile’s housing model (Gilbert, 2004a). All these cases introduce new dimensions to peripheral urbanization, affecting both its transversal logics and the types of spaces produced. In the context of these programs, the production of residential spaces includes not only infrastructure and services, but also legal and regularized housing. Moreover, with official subsidies and loans, housing for the poor exits the alternative circuits of financing and production to join the world of banks, real estate developers, and official mechanisms of financing. In countries that adopt these procedures, the housing market for the poor changes substantially, as the programs introduce a level of formality and capitalization previously unknown. As a consequence, they transform the house into another type of commodity: no longer a space to be autoconstructed and improved over time, but rather one, often limited and low quality, to be consumed as a finished product. What is not transformed, however, is spatial segregation, as the new housing complexes are invariably built in far away areas, consolidating class separation and spatial inequality.

### **Maintenance of a popular land market**

São Paulo, like Santiago, exploded in the 1950s during a period of rapid industrialization, but now grows very little, less than 1% per year.<sup>13</sup> The large majority of the migrant workers

who came to the city autoconstructed their houses in the peripheries, usually in places very far from the center. Squatting and occupation of public land were not very common; in the early 1970s, only 1% of the population lived in *favelas*, squatted settlements, compared to 20% in Santiago. Most of the people who moved to the peripheries bought a piece of land and, as a result, approximately 80% of the residents of the peripheries today have claims of ownership to their lots and houses. Thus, although a market of land existed in São Paulo since at least the 1950s, it was a kind of segregated market. The portion of this market accessible to the poor involved not only long distances from the center and a lack of infrastructure, but also several layers of illegality and irregularity—from the direct swindling of land, to the lack of registered deeds and permits, to the absence of infrastructure required by law. The risk of buying a property with precarious title was part of what made it affordable to the poor.

As in many other cities, the conditions of irregularity and the precariousness of urban infrastructure were at the basis of the organization of residents of the peripheries into social movements. These movements simultaneously pressed the state to improve infrastructure and services in the peripheries and enlarged their claims for democracy. In the context of democratic transition, the state directly engaged these movements and invested heavily in infrastructural improvements. By the early 2000s, water, electricity, and asphalt were almost universally distributed throughout the city, as in Santiago. However, what makes São Paulo's case especially interesting is the way in which organized movements and different governments at the local, state, and federal levels have engaged in a process of experimentation with urban policies that has focused simultaneously on the regularization of land in the peripheries; the prevention of the displacement of their inhabitants; the reproduction of improved spaces for low-income housing; and, more recently, the provision of social housing through the program *Minha Casa, Minha Vida*, inspired by the Chilean model. These policies have incorporated the improved spaces of the peripheries into the regularized city and expanded the home ownership of the poor.

As is well known, one of the main achievements of Brazilian social movements has been to influence the 1988 Brazilian Constitution and a radically innovative urban legislation, the 2001 *Estatuto da Cidade* (see Caldeira and Holston, 2005). In 2002, the city of São Paulo approved a new master plan according to this federal legislation. The plan has many remarkable aspects, but one of its most interesting dimensions is a clear attempt to address the issue of illegality and irregularity in the peripheries of the city. Many of the authors of São Paulo's Master Plan had a long history of advocacy for the peripheries and lobbying for progressive urban legislation and new modes of municipal administration that included popular participation. Having a deep knowledge of the conditions in the peripheries, and sometimes being organizers of social movements and NGOs themselves, many planners were clear that they wanted to legislate for what they termed 'the real city'. This meant legislating for the city with its complex patterns of urbanization combining all gradations of spaces, bringing the whole heterogeneous and unequal city into a parameter of legality and regularity, improving the peripheries without either making them unaffordable to the poor or displacing their residents.

In the final plan, which resulted from significant controversy, the city was treated as being formed by discordant and unequal process of urbanization that required different types of planning instruments. To deal with the peripheries, the 2002 Plan used a figure called Special Zones of Social Interests (ZEIS). Inside of these vast zones, most of them peripheral, legislators granted exemptions in land use standards in the interest of promoting low-income housing, accepting as normal substandard parameters that would be unacceptable in the better off parts of the city (Caldeira and Holston, 2014). Planners were acutely aware

that if they did not create specific norms for peripheral neighborhoods, it would be hard to control land speculation and the expulsion of poor residents. Thus, the peripheries had to be legalized and improved. But in a way they had to remain peripheral, as a specific market of land not viable for large real estate developments. One way of doing this was to limit the size and prohibit the combination of lots inside of ZEIS. In other words, in their campaign to continue to improve and legalize the peripheries without displacing their residents, urban reformers officially legalized inequality in the production of space.

This plan has now been replaced by another from 2014 that reinforces some of the same principles. Despite the fact that the new plan is too new for us to assess its effects, and that the old one has been the subject of several criticisms and many of its aspects have never been enforced (Caldeira and Holston, 2014), it is evident that São Paulo has not seen the same level of market driven displacement or undermining of the rights of the poor as in Istanbul or New Delhi, for example. Since the 1970s, the eviction of favelas in São Paulo has been rare, and recently slum upgrading has become routine. Although inequality is still the unmistakable mark of Brazilian cities, the quality of the urban environment has significantly improved and residents of the peripheries have been able to remain in the neighborhoods they built, in large measure due to their constant organizing.

Although autoconstruction has been the dominant mode of urbanization and housing for the poor in Brazilian cities, in 2008 the federal government introduced a massive housing project, in line with those in Chile and Mexico, called *Minha Casa, Minha Vida*. It provides subsidies for poor families to acquire housing produced by private developers. In its first five years, it has supported 557 developments in the São Paulo metropolitan region, resulting in the production of around 110,000 units, 34% of them for the very poor (Marques, 2014). As in Santiago, the program offers legal housing in serviced areas. Nevertheless, most of the developments for the lowest income group are in the peripheries—not only of the city, but of the broader metropolitan region. Thus, although illegality and irregularity are not being reproduced, the separation is, as the developments are usually located in remote locations, reinforcing a pattern of spatial and social segregation (LabCidade, 2014).

In sum, São Paulo is a case in which peripheral urbanization has always involved a market of land, but one that has been segregated and in which affordability has been associated with distance, precariousness, and illegality/irregularity. It is also a case in which citizens and the state have become deeply involved in simultaneous experiments of regularization of land and democratization that have shaped not only the city, but also Brazil.

## **Temporality and politics in the production of cities and theories**

Peripheral urbanization consists of a set of interrelated processes that entangle citizens and states in the production of cities of great heterogeneity and dynamism. At the core of the way in which these cities constantly change are the everyday efforts of residents to autoconstruct their dwellings and improve their neighborhoods. But central to the whole process are also what I called transversal logics and the modes of political engagements that they generate. I have argued that peripheral urbanization engages transversally logics of legal property, formal labor, state regulation, and market capitalism. Actors in this way of creating cities—residents, government officials at various levels, developers, speculators, activists—engage with each other not necessarily outside of mainstream logics, but rather by taking them transversally as matter of negotiation and transformation. The unspoken assumption of all involved is that precariousness, irregularity, and illegality may constitute the present condition under which they urbanize vast areas of the city, but are not permanent

conditions. They are rather a matter of struggle, negotiation, and especially of transformation; in short, of politics.

The discussions above show that the institutions of the state are crucial in creating conditions for urbanization, regularization, legalization, and the incorporation of the poor in the city. But it is also clear that the state does not act in the favor of autoconstructors out of its own heart. It does so when organized citizens are able to force it in their favor, maintaining their disturbing presence in public spaces and demanding changes to institutions, legislation, and ways in which the state operates and formulates policies. When this organizing becomes impossible or is weakened, policies may turn in the opposite direction, and dispossession and displacement of autoconstructors may result. Attempts to understand the dynamics of processes of peripheral urbanization must then necessarily dissect the transversal logics at play in each situation and the tense political engagements they generate.

At the core of peripheral urbanization is also a certain temporality: there is constant transformation. Of course, cities are always being transformed. But when the people involved in producing them agree that the present conditions—of the house, the neighborhood, or their legal status—are provisional and are constantly engaged in changing them, the attention to processes of transformation is critical. In fact, the cases I analyzed indicate not only that the conditions in peripheral areas always change, but also that in several cities this mode of producing the city may have changed recently in ways that test the limits of the notion of peripheral urbanization. This happens when the state sides with the formation of capitalist markets of land at the cost of displacing autoconstructors instead of incorporating them, or when massive projects of social housing generalize the possibility of the acquisition of legal and finished housing by the poor, thus eclipsing autoconstruction.

Peripheral urbanization is a widespread process throughout the global south, but it shapes cities unevenly. Although similar processes of urbanization can be identified in Istanbul, Santiago, and São Paulo, their histories are quite different, as are their present configurations and their tendencies of transformation. They are dissimilar cases. Their juxtaposition and the exploration of the tensions and variations that exist among them illuminate each other and open up new possibilities of understanding.

The three points I have just highlighted—the role played by transversal logics and their unpredictable outcomes; the constant processes of transformation; and the dissimilarity among cases—put specific demands on analyses of peripheral urbanization. Research of these processes should capture the instability of formations of legality and regulation and a significant amount of improvisation, experimentation, and contestation shaping the relationships among all involved, from residents to agents of the state. Research should also identify emergent conditions, configurations in the making, and constant transformation. Finally, research should explore significant dissimilarity among cases. The analysis I provided in this article pursues these paths using both qualitative logic and historical investigation. It approaches the set of processes that constitute peripheral urbanization simultaneously in their internal historical transformations *and* across their dissimilar formations. If the model of peripheral urbanization presented here is powerful, it is because it tries to bring to the forefront the double instability of this mode of producing cities in the global south: it is structured by ambiguity and contestation; and it is always being transformed.

### **Acknowledgements**

This paper has been in the making for a while. Its first incarnation was presented at the conference 'Peripheries: Decentering Urban Theory' that James Holston and I organized at UC Berkeley in 2009,

sponsored by Global Metropolitan Studies and in collaboration with the Center for Contemporary Culture of Barcelona. Another version was presented at Stanford University at the Workshop ‘Decentering Urban Theory: Peripheries, Urbanization and Popular Participation’ in 2013. Finally, a later version was presented as a LSE Cities Lecture in October 2014. I thank the participants in these events for their comments, especially James Holston, James Ferguson, Thomas Blom Hansen, Rick Burdett, and Austin Zeiderman. I also thank Ayfer Bartu Candan, Asher Ghertner, Carter Koppelman, Miguel Pérez, Alex Werth, my students who have engaged with me over the years in discussions about peripheries, and my colleagues and collaborators Gautam Bhan, Kelly Gillespie, and AbdouMaliq Simone. Finally, I would like to thank three anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments.

### Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Notes

1. Some of the main references in a now well-known argument that mainstream urban theories are inadequate to analyze the types of urbanization in the global south include Robinson (2002), Roy (2009), McFarlane (2008), Mbembe and Nuttall (2004), and Watson (2009).
2. Nor does peripheral refer to macro relations of uneven development, as in world system theory.
3. For example: McFarlane (2010), Robinson (2011, 2016), and Ward (2010).
4. Simone’s analysis in *For the City Yet to Come* (2004) is a brilliant example of this practice of thinking through dissimilar cases.
5. I use sometimes the term peripheries to refer to spaces produced by peripheral urbanization.
6. See Bonduki and Rolnik (1979), Caldeira (1994), Holston (1991), and Holston and Caldeira (2008).
7. On Mexico and its various layers of land irregularity, see Azuela (1987), Castillo (2001), Duhau (1998, 2014), Gilbert and de Jong (2015), and Jones and Ward (1998).
8. See, for instance, Bhan (2016), Holston (2008), Payne and Durant-Lasserve (2012), and Varley (2002).
9. Although terminology is usually not very precise, residences built on invaded land to which residents have no claim to ownership are usually referred to with special words, such as *favelas*, *invasões*, *campamentos*, etc.
10. My discussion of Istanbul is based especially on the works of Balaban (2011), Candan and Kolluoglu (2008), El-Kazaz (2013), Keyder (2005), Kuyucu (2014), Kuyucu and Ünsal (2010), and Tugal (2013).
11. One might be tempted to use the label ‘gentrification’ to describe the processes of land requalification going on in Istanbul. The Turkish scholars who have been analyzing these processes tend not to use this term. Instead, they talk about enclosure of urban space (Balaban, 2011), property transfer (Kuyucu and Ünsal, 2010), institutionalization of private property regimes (Kuyucu, 2014), and social exclusion (Keyder, 2005). Thus, although they do not address the discussion directly, it seems that they would be in agreement with Ghertner’s (2014) argument that gentrification theory should not be extended into the global south. In fact, the assumptions of this theory are based on the Euro-American cases of postindustrial societies with well-established private property regimes. When transferred to different contexts in which the main dynamic may

be exactly the constitution of such regimes, the notion of gentrification may “reduce the analytical clarity” of the studies (Ghertner, 2014: 1556).

12. My discussion of the Chilean case is based especially on Ducci (1997), Gilbert (2002, 2004a, 2004b), Murphy (2014), Rodríguez and Sugranyes (2005), Rodríguez and Rodríguez (2009), Salcedo (2010), and Tapia Zarricueta (2010).
13. My analysis of São Paulo is based mainly on my own research over the last 30 years as well as on my work in collaboration with James Holston and on his own research. It is a work constructed in constant dialogue with our Brazilian colleagues, especially Nabil Bonduki, Eduardo Marques, Marcelo Nery, Regina Prosperi Meyer, and Raquel Rolnik. In the last 40 years, Brazilian social scientists and urbanists have generated a phenomenal production elucidating the processes of peripheral urbanization throughout Brazil. I deeply regret only been able to cite a minimal fraction of this production here.

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