Informal housing and residents' wellbeing in Caracas and Sydney: a comparative paper through residents' experiences.

Abstract

Informal housing has been assessed to have a negative impact on its residents' wellbeing. However, this paper demonstrates that residents also perceive and experience some positive effects within their precarious housing condition. Both the Global South and North are home to informal housing, yet there are very few studies that compare these contexts. In response, this paper discusses the differences and similarities between how informality and precarious housing emerges and is experienced by its residents in both contexts.

Qualitative content analysis was applied to interpret the data collected in two separate studies developed in Caracas and Sydney. The perspectives of two different populations that are deemed as vulnerable low-income groups are discussed: *slum dwellers* and *international students*. Aligning with Roy's proposition about the need to include actors such as residents in the discussion on informality (Roy 2005), this research approach was applied to delve into the accounts of the participants to understand their meanings and experiences in the production of, access to, and their everyday lives in their housing environment.

Four themes arose from the interpretation of the participants' accounts: 1) the production of informal housing, 2) permanency vs. temporality, 3) networks and relationships, and 4) the overall impact on residents' everyday lives and wellbeing. These emerged as significant themes that led to the understanding of the perceived wellbeing of informal housing residents.

Residents' experiences in the Global North and South are indeed different. However, despite the oppressing external conditions and their vulnerability, people in both areas implement psychosocial and physical strategies to improve their housing conditions and wellbeing. By acknowledging and understanding people's experiences of informal housing – including those of a positive nature –, we gain a deeper comprehension of the processes influencing residents' wellbeing.

Key messages:

- Aside from negative impacts, informal housing also has positive impacts on residents' wellbeing.
- Residents implement psychosocial & physical strategies to improve their informal housing experience, thus improving their perception of their overall wellbeing.

- There are meaningful commonalities between the residents' perceptions of housing and wellbeing in Caracas and Sydney.

Introduction:

By discussing the perspectives and experiences of residents living in informal housing in Caracas, Venezuela and Sydney, Australia, this paper responds to this special issue's call on *precarious housing and wellbeing, focusing* on *vulnerable low-income populations* as slum dwellers and international students. This article unpacks the common elements found in the two rather different case studies regarding how informal housing is produced, accessed, experienced and the perceived impacts on its residents' wellbeing.

Pendall et al (2012) discuss that substandard quality, unaffordability, overcrowding, and the failure to meet people's needs are the main characteristics of precarious housing. Closely related to this concept, and with a strong focus on the Global South, informal housing has traditionally been defined as one 'built by artisans and small, local builders with or for the users and usually without official authorization' (Turner 1976: 1143). On a similar note, but focusing on the Global North, Gurran et al (2019) define informal housing as 'housing that contravenes existing planning, building, or tenancy rules, or which offers residents few protections within these rules' (9). Informality often involves precariousness, and at the same time, it encompasses broader discussions on production of the space, economy, employment, activities and housing (Porter et al 2011, Roy 2009, 2005); hence *informality* is the term adopted in this paper.

There is a well-established focus on informal housing and its corresponding challenges and opportunities in the Global South (encompassing developing countries). At the same time, there is a rising interest in the existence and production of informality in the Global North (encompassing developed countries). A great deal of the literature focusing on these areas highlights the lessons to be drawn from one to the other, especially what the Global North can learn from the Global South (Devlin 2018). However, an entwined discussion about these two contexts is uncommon.

Rather than focusing on what each context can learn from the other, this article focuses on the shared themes expressed and experienced by residents from these two contexts. This analysis discusses the perspectives of the residents of an informal settlement in Caracas with those of international university students living in precarious conditions in Sydney. This paper then presents a section on informality and informal housing, focusing on both the Global South and North, followed by a brief discussion on wellbeing within this topic. A description of the

methodological approach and the case studies are then discussed, followed by the findings, discussion, and conclusion.

Informality and informal housing

Informality has been discussed in academic literature since the 1970s (Hart 1973, Perlman 1976, Turner 1976). Dovey and Kamalipour (2018) claim the term *informality* 'is also used to avoid terms with overlapping meanings, like "slum" and "squatter".' (223), which often have a derogatory connotation to areas built by dwellers.

Focusing mainly on the Global South, informal settlements and housing are incrementally built by people through unauthorised non-compliance of official (formal) planning processes and codes (Dovey and Kamalipour 2018, Huchzermeyer 2010). Similarly, informal activities in the Global North are often seen as "unorganized, marginal enterprises that should be ignored" or "unlawful activities that should be stopped and prosecuted" (Mukhija & Loukaitou-Sideris, 2014, p. 11). In this vein, informality can be considered as 'the violation of land use regulations' (Roy 2005: 149), where the state, often arbitrarily, uses its power to decide what becomes formal and informal housing through selective application of land-use zoning and development controls (Roy 2005).

However, informality should not be seen as a phenomenon occupying vacant urban spaces or being separated from *formal* settings. It should rather be seen as a set of practices in relation to the *formal city* (Iveson et al 2019), understanding that urban informality is a complex and layered issue, which can often be oversimplified (Devlin 2018, Iveson et al 2019).

The poor and middle- and high-income residents all over the world engage in informal practices in different locations, using various approaches and attaining different outcomes, but benefitting in the end from such conditions (Banks et al 2020, Devlin 2018, Mukhija and Loukaitou-Sideris 2014).

Informal housing in the Global South:

Rapid and unplanned urban growth, accompanied by inefficient governance in looking after the poor and urban inequality, is one of the main drivers to the origins of slums in the Global South (Turner 1976, United Nations Population Fund 2007). Despite governments' efforts to create efficient housing policies, these fail because they are based on assumptions of how much people can pay for housing, not necessarily addressing the real needs of vulnerable populations. Unable to afford the formal housing market due to the limited employment opportunities, people find their own accessible land and create affordable housing for themselves leading to

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squatting (Davis 2006, Dovey and King 2011, Turner 1976, United Nations Human Settlements Programme 2003). Their only option may be publicly owned land, land not valued by the market or those that were deemed undevelopable (Bolívar and Pedrazzini 2008, Dovey and King 2011, Hernández García 2013, Kudva 2009, United Nations Population Fund 2007), such as the escarpments of Caracas. Thus, informal settlements emerged in marginalised spaces in an unstructured manner and without any initial structural and physical consolidation (Rangel Mora 2001), leading informality in the Global South to be 'viewed as fluid, resilient and flexible' (Devlin 2018: 580).

The physicality of informal settlements in the Global South has been widely studied, with a strong focus on Southeast Asia and Latin America (Davis 2006, do Prado Valladares 2005, Dovey and Kamalipour 2018, 2018, Dovey and King 2011, Fabricius 2008, Rangel Mora 2001). Informal settlement typologies, and thus informal housing, located in the Global South are very visible, understanding that this context has its own spatial and political logic (Devlin 2018).

Informality in the Global North:

Informality has been discussed in cities in Global North, focusing on the transition to post-industrial global economies since the 1970s (Iveson et al 2019), understanding that informal activities are integral parts of cities in the Global North (Mukhija and Loukaitou-Sideris 2015). Opposed to informal housing in the Global South, where it is usually highly visible, concentrated in an area and with a particular built form, informal housing in the Global North is often scattered and mostly entwined and hidden within formal housing (Durst and Wegmann 2017, Mukhija and Loukaitou-Sideris 2014, Nasreen and Ruming 2020).

Informality can be understood as 'born of desire and (…) born of need' (Devlin 2018: 568), of which the prior is 'undertaken by the urban poor to meet basic needs and [the latter is] engaged in by more well-off residents for convenience, efficiency or creative expression' (Devlin 2018: 570). Informal housing in Global North can be seen as a bottom-up approach to negotiate, achieve flexibility, better functionality, affordability and improved social connections, as well as, on some occasions, as an opportunity for profit from residents (Nasreen and Ruming 2020). In Australia, informal housing involves a wide range of practices including squatting and caretaking, intentional communities, housing cooperatives, self-building, subletting and informal subdivisions, room-sharing, house sharing and renting in precarious conditions or

terms (Alam et al 2021, Crabtree 2018, Gurran et al 2019, Iveson et al 2019, Nasreen and Ruming 2020)

Wellbeing and informal housing

Several authors highlight the relevance of housing and the built environment on people's wellbeing; however, there is a lack of clear definition of the latter, and it often focuses on people's health (Ho et al 2004, Kent and Thompson 2019, Rowley and Ong 2012). Notwithstanding the above, wellbeing refers to a range of dimensions not only including physical and mental health, but also social connection, a sense of accomplishment, personal fulfilment and overall quality of life and happiness in the context of the built environment (Boyko et al 2020, Dovjak and Kukec 2019, Jones et al 2019). Wellbeing can be defined as the quality of life and satisfaction of people regarding health, living standards, social cohesion, safety, rights, cultural and spiritual fulfilment, and connection to nature (UN Environment Program 2021, United Nations Development Program 2021).

According to the World Health Organization (2018) proper housing conditions are becoming more critical for health due to changing climate and demographics. Inadequate housing can pose many health risks to its inhabitants (increasing the chances of injuries and levels of stress) and is one of the drivers of health inequality, affecting overall wellbeing (World Health Organization 2018). Some common indicators of a built environment that do not support good wellbeing are dampness, poor air quality, temperature extremes, noise and lack of daylight (Dovjak and Kukec 2019). Overcrowding may influence mental and physical health (World Health Organization 2018).

People spend about 70% of their time at home. Hence, it is recommended to promote healthy housing, which is defined as 'shelter that supports a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing' (World Health Organization 2018: 2).

Shared room housing, which is one of the types of informal housing, violates in some cases health and safety standards, hosting overcrowded and unsafe conditions, which ultimately contribute to diminished physical and mental health (Nasreen and Ruming 2020). This phenomenon and its negative effects on wellbeing occur in the different types of informal housing both in the Global North and South (Baum et al 1999, Briceño León 2008, Franz et al 2015).

Nevertheless, there are also opposing and controversial perspectives to the above, as De Soto (1989) who highlights the importance of understanding informality as an entrepreneurial

response to excessive legislation imposed by the state in their general wellbeing processes, including livelihoods and housing development. Thus, people who engage in informal practices to provide themselves with housing are, from this perspective, looking after their overall wellbeing.

Relatedly, as Alam et al (2020) state:

> alongside shelter, the neighbourhood socio-ecologies and their sites and situations that reinforce social capital and livelihoods are also important for informal settlers to achieve identity and wellbeing in order to develop the sense of home in the city. (Alam et al 2020: 1602)

These external – community factors that lead residents of informal housing to achieve wellbeing are part of psychosocial strategies that involve personal approaches as other social supports linked to connectedness, sense of community and others.

The following sections discuss the experiences of informal housing residents in the two case studies and their relationship with some of the defining elements of wellbeing.

Methodological approach:

The data from two different studies inform this paper: the first conducted in Caracas (Global South) and the second in Sydney (Global North). The methodological approach adopted in both had strong qualitative components enabling to delve into people's emotions, experiences and actions. Both investigations involved a case study research design focusing on two populations deemed low-income (hence, *vulnerable*): 1) informal settlement dwellers; and 2) international students. Even though not all informal settlement dwellers and not all international students fall under this *low-income* category, the participants of this research do.

In Caracas, the data was collected in Petare – the second largest informal settlement in Latin America – through 38 in-depth interviews to delve into residents' cultural practices and their informal settlement space. Participants included both female and male residents from ages 18 to 60 years old consisting of several generations of the barrio development. These generations comprised people who squatted and built the barrio, their children and grandchildren.

In Sydney, the data was collected through a mixed-methods approach, including an anonymous online survey that comprised both closed and open-ended questions, followed by in-depth semi-structured interviews to deepen the understanding of university students' housing conditions and the impact on their lives. The survey, sent to a random sample of 5,000 students of one of the largest universities in Sydney, attained a total of 612 valid responses, of which only 31 students lived in what we deem as informal housing due to overcrowded or insecurity

of tenure. These students were subsequently invited to participate in the interview stage, with 12 participants taking part in this process.[1]

Thematic analysis was the approach adopted to interpreting the qualitative data of both studies. This analysis brought out unexpected commonalities, as well as expected differences, between these contexts and populations. At the same time, this process highlighted the shared topics arising from the Caracas and Sydney residents' discussion of their housing experience. This led to the development of this paper addressing the emerging research questions: 1) *what are the differences and commonalities between informal housing in the Global South and Global North?* and 2) *how does informal housing in these areas affect its residents' wellbeing?*

Context of study: Informal housing in Caracas

Informal architecture and informal urban design define Caracas's informal settlements, where the construction of the house led to the construction and visibility of the settlement (Dovey and Kamalipour 2018) - (Figure 1).

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[1] For further detail on the data collection process and questions asked to participants in both studies, please contact the author.

Image 1: *Informal* and *formal* Caracas from the East - Petare with the *formal* Caracas in the background. Source: G. Quintana Vigiola, 2009

Informal settlements in Caracas originated because of the city's very rapid urbanisation process from the 1940s to the late 1960s. In this period, Venezuela's urban population grew from 30% to 70% (The World Bank 2016). The San Francisco Valley, where Caracas is located, went from having scattered settlements to being almost entirely urbanised. Labour was needed to construct its expansion, one of the major attractors of skilled and unskilled people from overseas and rural areas (Gabaldón 2007). However, as happened globally, the housing market or government did not cater to this incoming population. Thus, while these expansion areas were being planned and developed, informal settlements also started to grow organically.

The development of these settlements comprises three stages: 1) squatting, 2) consolidation, and 3) densification (Bolívar 1998, Rosas Meza 2009). The first stage occurring during this initial period between 1940 and 1960 involved the location of a spot and construction of an initial shack called rancho (Rosas Meza 2009). Several families or individuals usually engaged in this process. Petare started to host from the mid-1960s an increasing population and one that was growing at a very fast pace.

In Latin America (including in Venezuela), the political environment from the late 1950s to the 1970s was volatile, shifting from dictatorships to democracy. This phenomenon opened a temporary window of opportunity for land invasions (Davis 2006). Corruption, clientelism and populism also drove the creation and growth of informal settlements worldwide, including in Caracas. Politicians both in and running for government turned a blind eye to people squatting both public and private lands and unofficially aided them with resources such as building materials in exchange for votes (Bolívar and Pedrazzini 2008, Hernández García 2013, Kudva 2009, Trigo 2008).

This period hosted the consolidation stage, which comprises an incremental substitution of the initial shack with a house. The latter is usually built with robust materials such as reinforced concrete, brick walls, and cement floors (Rosas Meza 2009). This stage is initiated once families feel secure as the fear of evictions decreases (Ontiveros 2006, Wiesenfeld 1998). Even though informal settlements have become more stable and thus a more permanent area in the city, these robust houses are still considered precarious housing. In most cases, they lack the fundamental inbuilt infrastructure and services, and their residents live in overcrowded conditions and with no land tenure.

Despite these conditions and legal insecurity, informal settlements in Caracas almost quadrupled the area they occupied between 1960 and 1980 (Bolívar 2004, Bolívar and Pedrazzini 2008), date from which they started to densify. The final densification stage arises when there is no more room to spread, so the houses grow vertically, leading to an informal settlement with 2 to 5-story buildings (Bolívar and Pedrazzini 2008, Rosas Meza 2009).

From the 1970s, but particularly in the 1990s, a significant interest in urban development strategies arose worldwide focusing on the intervention in informal settlements to improve the quality of life of their residents (Giménez Mercado et al 2008, Lombard 2014, United Nations Human Settlements Programme 2003). In this context, the *Programa de Rehabilitación Física de Barrios* (Barrios' Physical Rehabilitation Program) was formulated and launched in the late 1990s in Venezuela (Machado Colmenares 2012). This program acknowledged the existence of informal settlements and recognised that they were a critical part of the city, the physical realm of which lacked basic infrastructure, services, and facilities. Most importantly, the program recognised that these areas were there to stay – they were a permanent part of the city. In the '90s, there also was a worldwide interest in land regularisation and developing policies to deliver secure land tenure. However, it became evident that these did not really end nor address poverty, nor solve informality (Roy 2005). Nevertheless, the Venezuelan Presidential Decree #1,666 for Regularisation of Land Tenure in Urban Barrios was launched on 4th February 2002, starting the formalisation process that continued to evolve over the years, including the Special Act of Integral Regularisation of the Land in Urban Settlements in 2006, and followed by the Special Act of Integral Regularisation of Urban and Peri-urban Settlements in 2011 (Fernández Cabrera 2012). However, due to the complexity of this process, there has been little progress to the date considering the number of land titles given vs. the number of dwellings and households in informal settlements.

Context of study: Informal housing in Sydney

Informal housing literature in the Global North, and even more focusing on Australia, is relatively limited compared to the Global South, with authors like Hilder et al (2018) that focus on community living and McNamara and Connell (2007) who discuss shared housing. Regardless that these residential arrangements can, on some limited occasions, lead to precariousness, they are not fundamentally *informal housing*. In the same vein, Goodman et al (2013) reported on the different categories of marginal housing in Australia comprising not-registered boarding and rooming houses, among others, which on occasions involve deep levels

of informality. Nasreen and Ruming (2019, 2020) and Gurran et al (2019) focus on informality in Sydney looking at its characteristics and challenges.

Gurran et al (2019) asserted that some secondary dwellings, such as non-compliant granny flats or house extensions, and some moveable homes such as caravans, are part of the production of informal housing in Sydney. The authors also emphasised that illegal boarding houses do exist, but they are more challenging to identify. The latter is embedded in the private rental market, usually involving overcrowding -which is considered as two or more unrelated people sharing a room- and other informal conditions (Goodman et al 2013, Gurran et al 2019, Nasreen and Ruming 2019), such as 'poor health and safety standards, discrimination and unaffordability" (Nasreen and Ruming 2019: 152). According to the NSW government, there are seven minimum standard criteria that a house or unit must comply with to be *fit for habitation*, among which 'being structurally sound', having adequate lighting and ventilation, as well adequate plumbing and drainage are found (Fair Trading NSW 2020). Often, these illegal boarding and rooming houses do not comply with these standards, especially that of adequate ventilation and lighting.

The main drivers of informal housing in Sydney relate to 1) *legalities and requirements*: difficulties in securing formal accommodation within the private rental market due to tight eligibility, straining application approval processes, or inability to provide previous rental and/or current income statements (Nasreen and Ruming 2019); 2) *social aspects*: people seeking social support, similar cultural backgrounds or friends, or independence (McNamara and Connell 2007, Nasreen and Ruming 2019); and 3) *location and economic considerations*: mainly relating to the desire or need to live close to work or educational facilities, unaffordability, or the desire to safe money (Clark and Tuffin 2015, Nasreen and Ruming 2019, Nasreen and Ruming 2020).

Vulnerable groups such as students, recent migrants and people with unstable income are those who mainly inhabit informal housing in Sydney (Nasreen and Ruming 2019). International students, the focus population of our Sydney study, are found to be more vulnerable to experience informal housing conditions due to the lack of previous rental references, and lack of awareness of the housing market in Sydney and their legal rights (Goodman et al 2013, Gurran et al 2019, Obeng-Odoom 2012, Parkinson et al 2018).

Findings

Common critical themes related to housing arose from the accounts of the Caracas's and Sydney's participants: 1) the production of informal housing, 2) permanency vs. temporality,

3) networks and relationships, and 4) overall impacts on residents' everyday lives and wellbeing. These themes discussed below present some critical aspects highlighting the commonalities and differences in these specific contexts within the Global South and Global North.

Production of informal housing:

Even though one of the main drivers for informal housing in both the Global South and Global North is people needing housing and not being able to afford the housing market, how it is produced in each context is different. The shape of informality in Caracas is evident to the eye; the compact and dense structures let people know the existence of an informal settlement. In Sydney, this is not so evident; these precarious spaces hide away from the bystander's eye, real estate agents and even authorities. It is known that they exist, but not precisely where; they are disguised within the formal-planned-approved structures of cities.

Informal settlements in Caracas have been built by their residents with the limited financial and technical resources they have had and without following planning regulations nor guidelines. As GU, a Caracas participant, mentions, '*these settlements are the outcome of invasions* [squatting]; *there is no regulatory plan. No! Everyone just goes wherever they can.*' This process starts from scratch, in areas where not even infrastructure was provided.

> M: when I arrived here... toads, snakes and mud!!! (laughter). I have 30 years here in this *barrio* [informal settlement], and this was blaaaaaacccckkkk mud, black, and grass, and toads, snakes and... a lot of snails...

The morphogenesis of these areas was illegal and unplanned from an official perspective, and yet they were very visible. As per M's quote, people built these originally natural environments into their home with their own hands and effort. The initial shack in which they lived was very precarious. As Q highlights: '*(...) there's really a bad... situation (...) subhuman! (...) perhaps you have four tin walls (...) and they live everything there!*'

With time, people have invested money and effort into improving their houses:

> M: because I had no money, I had to borrow it. Then I kind of improved the floor… there was no water, no electricity (…) then with the money that I had left I bought cement, I bought materials and built this tiny room. I began building it, but this house has been renovated twice.

Despite the hidden informal housing in Sydney is also partly driven by the need of people who cannot afford rental prices, it is produced by private owners and tenants that capitalise on this unmet emergent market. This 'new' housing solution is not *built* itself by the people in need; it is fabricated by people who see a niche market opportunity: low-cost housing within existing private apartments of houses to cater to this vulnerable population.

> IP9: so, in the application on the flatmate site (…) this girl, the owner[2], I gave her my WhatsApp number so she just contacted me (…) [the unit was] only one room, and (…) actually there were 7 people, but, yes, I know it's illegal and the other two girls stayed in the living room (…) they lived in the single bed, but there is (…) only mattress in the living room only covered with a curtain.

These adjustments of the physicality of the private sector are usually illegal as they often break tenancy contracts and strata by-laws, not to say that they also break building codes on some occasions. These adjustments are made to accommodate as many people as possible.

> IP6: that room is not actually a room. It's a storage room without a door. So, the owner uses a curtain to cover it, but it has three side walls (…) It has one single bed and a little desk for the lamp and there's a wardrobe and there's also a… because it's under some part of the room is under the stairs there's also a storage space in that room.

Different agents with different needs and desires produce informal housing in Sydney and Caracas. However, in both cases, they break regulations and cater for populations that cannot access the formal rental market. Although the production of informal housing does not directly address matters of wellbeing, it does somehow address the right to housing that individuals have by providing shelter to those in precarious circumstances.

Permanency vs. temporality

Residents from both contexts highlighted the length of residing in these informal conditions. In Caracas, despite informal housing arose just as an initial step to move *into the city* (Trigo 2008), hence temporary, residents built a life in these areas. As M states: '*I have forty-*

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[2] 'The owner' that IP9 is referring to was not really the owner. She was the head tenant of the unit and illegally sublet the place to overseas students and working holiday visa holders. This 'girl' had several units in Sydney to sublet.

something years, almost 50 years living here (...) We were almost the founders of this settlement.'

People have raised their families in these areas; usually, they cannot access the formal housing market, and even when they can, they have already set roots in these places, leading them to want to stay in their area.

> GU: (…) I was… twelve, eleven years old when this was starting to be founded… (…) Then… I got married and had my family here. I have my wife, my kids, and even grandkids.

Over time, informal settlements in Caracas became permanent places in which people have wanted to stay both because of the financial and emotional investment and the social connections and deep relationships they built. This financial investment meant that all the extra money the family had after supplying for their basic needs went into the development of the house, which is part of the consolidation stage mentioned above.

> GU: (…) I think it has changed a lot regarding the constructions that are there because they were *ranchos* before. Now many houses have changed; there are decent houses, brick houses (…) there are people who have studied, have prepared themselves, have built their houses pretty well… and live a bit better within the settlement…

On the other hand, residents of informal housing in Sydney do live in informal housing on a temporary basis. All the participants in this research stated that they live in these conditions while their economic condition improves or just while studying before going back to their home countries, which can be between one to three years.

> SP28: I'd like to live near the uni so I don't need to spend too much time on the way to uni. More time is saved for research. The rent is very expensive around the uni so I can only share room with other people to save money. Sometimes I have to live in the living room because it much cheaper.

As stated in the literature review and SP28 among other participants, affordability and closeness to university as the main drivers to choosing to live in housing with precarious conditions. Closeness to employment and educational sources have also been drivers in the Global South (and in Caracas) of the drivers of informal settlements and housing. International students' length of stay in informal housing may vary depending on convenience, price and

mostly on social conditions, as discussed in the following section. In both the Caracas and Sydney cases, the theme of permanency directly relates to social connections and cohesion, which is one of the elements of wellbeing.

International students are by nature a non-permanent population in Australia. Thus, their initial goal is not to settle in their Sydney place of residence. The main aim is to find a comfortable place for them to live while they study: '*my house is a place for me to sleep. So, I spend the whole day in uni. I have a wonderful life.*' (P9). From the start, international students know that this is just a temporary house, which most do not call home. This awareness seems to enable wellbeing through personal fulfilment, a sense of accomplishment and overall happiness, exemplified in P9's reflection on his/her own life.

The matter of permanency from the residents' perspectives is one of the fundamental differences between the Caracas and the Sydney case studies that are translatable to other places in the Global South and Global North. The prior is there to stay, the latter no. These differences in permanency also impact the precarious condition of housing per se. In Caracas, due to people building their lives in these areas, the actual house tends to improve over time, in some cases reaching high construction standards (Bolívar and Pedrazzini 2008), but still considered informal mainly because of overcrowding and their location in an informal settlement. On the other hand, due to the invisibility of informal conditions in Sydney and the fact that residents are only there temporarily, the housing condition itself does not improve, creating a permanent informal house with temporary residents.

Despite the difference in the production of the space, informal housing in places in the Global South and Global North seem to be here to stay; these appear now to be permanent conditions of the city. These spaces in Caracas house the same people over the years; families stay for generations. In Sydney, people reside in these spaces only for a limited time, but the spaces remain as the target population per se never ceases to exist; it is a moving and fluctuating group, it is a cyclical market.

Networks and relationships

Social connections arose as a central theme when discussing their housing with the Caracas's and Sydney's participants. In the first case, dwellers of informal settlements migrated to the

city either with their families, or individually to bring the rest of their family to provide them with a better quality of life or because they had family members already living there.

> M: then my mum bought this house there (…) which is in front of my sister's (…), and suddenly my sister's mother-in-law (…) was selling this rancho here, and I said 'Ay, would you sell it to me? (…) and now my very own grandkids have had to come live here upstairs. Because we live here together, but not mixed, each of us is on their own, but in the same house.

When the family grows and have more resources to improve their housing conditions, they grow upwards, building semi-separate units above the initial house (also in an informal non-complying construction) to host the growing family core. This process highlights the significance of relationships in Caracas's informal settlements. These family (and sometimes neighbourly) relations are critical to the social connection and cohesion, which are paramount in residents' wellbeing. The support people receive from their families in times of hardship becomes the solid foundations of dwellers' mental health as they experience solidarity and support and the (psychosocial) safety of belonging to a group. They are not alone, creating a deep sense of community.

As in the case of Caracas, international students in Sydney arrive at an unknown context, often without knowing anyone and having little guidance on how to go about finding accommodation. To facilitate this search, on some occasions, they reach out to the familiar sources they may have, which often are their home communities and people from the same cultural background that sometimes offer this informal housing as an initial solution to this vulnerable population.

> IP9: during that time, I had my Indonesian community so getting this WhatsApp group, there's like a girl (…) she finished her master, and then she gives the advertisement of this unit, and then I just checked, did the inspection.

However, this case, as well as having family here, is an exception. According to the data, the main ways students end up in informal housing in Sydney are through flat-sharing sites, Gumtree, and Facebook. Arriving by themselves forces people to create new connections and adjust to living in new conditions, which in some cases are stressful, thus affecting residents' wellbeing.

> SP171: Room sharing is not comfortable because I do not have my own time to take a rest. If the roommate is good, it does not matter but it depends on luck. I will look for other rooms until I can get proper place to take a rest and feel comfortable.

As mentioned by SP171, a Chinese international student whose 'room' is the living room, flatmates and roommates are a fundamental factor in the decision-making process of students when deciding if to stay in a place or look for a new one while studying in Sydney. The relationship and response from the landlord/landlady are also paramount. When students have a supportive environment, they tend to stay longer as they perceive their housing conditions as positive regardless of overcrowding or breaking any other regulations. An example is SP607, a student from Singapore who shares with nine people in a 2-bedroom place: '*I am comfortable in living in my current place. Everything is available in this house, and the people here are nice and friendly too.*'

Personal relationships and a sense of welcoming and safety are vital in experiencing happiness and overall satisfaction with the living standards, which are a very subjective part of wellbeing. No matter if the relationships are with family or strangers, they arose as having the same positive influence on both the Caracas and Sydney participants.

Overall impact on residents' everyday lives and wellbeing

As discussed in the literature review, informal housing has been assessed to negatively impact its residents' health and overall wellbeing. That is a fact that residents of both case studies acknowledge. Referring to the desire to leave the informal settlement in which he lives in Caracas, GU mentioned:

> GU: (…) we all want to leave, no? (…) Leave and live better! (…) Because if, if we talk about 10, 15 years ago, this here was (…) wonderful, because there weren't these many problems as we have now, such high delinquency, so many vehicles (…)

The reason for wanting to leave remains longing to have a better quality of life (as it was the initial driver to come to the city and squat). However, nowadays, the reason is safety: fleeing from criminal activities and shootouts; preventing children from being surrounded by this environment and preventing them from entering a gang. In this case, the overall environment of violence has a negative impact on residents' wellbeing, not the housing conditions per se. Considering the definition of wellbeing presented above and the findings regarding the production of informal housing, the permanency and the relationships, the housing condition

can also positively affect people's wellbeing on several occasions. When delving into residents' experiences, we understand that the topic of housing and wellbeing does not embed a black & white discussion and that subjectivity plays a significant role.

When discussing their everyday lives, people in informal settlements in Caracas tend to mention their area, how family and neighbourly relationships and networks are paramount in their lives, and how those create place attachment.

> Ñ: I needed my Julián Blanco! Because there is where my people are, the ones I know, the ones that have grown old with me, and that's it!

Julián Blanco, an area located in Petare, is the informal settlements in which Ñ lives. Despite the informal housing conditions and other negatives of the area, the social networks created in this place have had a positive effect on her life, mental health, connections, and overall quality of life, hence on her wellbeing. Despite the difference between the official minimum living standards and the precarious conditions in which some people live, residents do not assess their housing as having negative impacts on their everyday lives or wellbeing. People focus on the attachments and the happiness experienced there.

Despite the differences in the social process embedded in the production of housing in Caracas and Sydney, social and personal relationships have also become one of the main wellbeing elements that some students assessed as paramount in the latter case. When referring to her experience in the 1-bedroom unit sharing with other six people, P9 highlighted: '*The girls in the first house, we still keep in touch because, with some of the girls; the good thing about the house is the friends*'

Students also valued other aspects within their informal housing:

> IP6: [discussing a 3-bedroom house shared with other 14 people] – I think it's a little bit crowded, but it's acceptable. (…) because I don't see all 14 people together at the same time, so, when I come back and come out I only see one or two inside, so I think it's not really crowded (…) Also, there's a garden. I really like having the garden beside the window. I can look at the garden beside the window. I mean, my bed is beside the window so I can look out in the garden.

When talking about his/her place of residence, IP6 highlights the positive aspects it has. These elements that he regards have altogether a positive impact his mental health, especially the access to the garden which is linked to the connection to nature highlighted in the literature review section as one of the wellbeing elements. Small elements like having a garden make his

housing experience better; he even mentions with excitement '*it feels like living in a treehouse.*' Additionally, highlighting the subjectivity of what positive or negative is, IP6 referred to the 'single bedroom' in his house (the storage under the staircase) as '*still pretty good*' as it provided privacy and extra storage. Although these living conditions are illegal, unacceptable, and exploitative that by Australian standards, IP6 not only finds the positive in it but chooses to live there. When asked if he would move if he had more money, he answered: '*If I had more money, I could just safe it for my other spending, I can buy other gadgets.*' (IP6).

Aside from the negative effects depicted in the literature review and mentioned by participants, informal housing also has some positives on residents' everyday lives in both Caracas and Sydney. These mainly relate to the social bonds that people create in these environments, but it is also due to residents' coping strategies. These psychosocial strategies range from building support networks, physically improving their house, room or even bed, looking for a house that is even a bit better or even finding the positives such as being able to look at a tree. The implementation of these different psychosocial strategies arises because regardless of the initial drivers to living in precarious conditions, people ultimately choose where to live and often make the most of this experience, choosing to see the wellness in it.

Discussion

Informal housing in the Global South and Global North arises as people's response to the provision of affordable housing close to activity hubs relevant to people, whether employment or educational centres (Gurran et al 2019, Roy 2009, Turner 1976). This approach continues to follow trends from the industrial city where precarious and overcrowded housing was built surrounding factories. Over 150 years and several urban planning and design movements later, it is evident that the provision of healthy (affordable) housing for everyone has not been accomplished.

People are still solving a housing crisis by their own means. People in need who cannot access the formal rental market are taking action – as is the case of residents of informal settlements –, or at least are being resilient to their conditions – as is the case of international students. In Latin America, informality is very visible, and its most visible representation is housing (Dovey and Kamalipour 2018). People squatted lands and started building a life there, a life and a place that became permanent in the cityscape. In Sydney, informal housing originates from private owners building illegal subdivisions in their properties – such as accommodating people in balconies or having bedrooms under staircases – breaching the Building Codes of Australia or breaching strata regulations. Informal housing also occurs when tenants breach

their rental contracts and illegally sublet rooms and even beds, hosting a lot more people than the contract states (Goodman et al 2013). In the Global North, where people tend to follow the rules, and governments are stricter and less populist than in Global South countries, these informal housing conditions seem to be invisible, yet they are rapidly growing.

However, these informal housing conditions in the Global North are not really invisible: it is a topic discussed in the literature and the media. Thus, the question is: if this is deemed as sub-standard and exploitative (Gurran et al 2019), why does it continue to exist? Some efforts have been made by forming investigation squads and chasing people out of these houses. However, this approach just moves the situation and does not solve it.

> IP9: (…) [my landlady] got busted for some other apartment, and she needed to move three girls from their apartment to ours, so it's very crowded on that night that these two girls [were brought to their place] (…) we were there with nine people [in the 1-bedroom unit]. So, she got busted because (…) this person let the security into the house and (...) [there were] too many people, so this landlord, the Indonesian girl, she have to move some of the girls out so she would get a fine.

This 'solution' to informal housing is only creating a displacement and gentrification problem, which raises more questions than answers related to this issue. Both in Caracas and Sydney, people continue to engage in the production of informal housing, whether for need or profit – which also happens in the Global South (Ono and Kidokoro 2020, Potts 2020) – and people continue to choose to live in these housing.

This paper acknowledges the understanding of informal housing having negative impacts on its residents. However, it also demonstrates that from participants' perspective, there are also perceived positives that contribute to some of the elements that wellbeing comprises. How informal housing is produced, accessed, the social networks' role in this process and the conception of permanency impact how people perceive the impact of housing on their wellbeing. By acknowledging and understanding people's experience of informal housing, we gain a deeper comprehension of the processes influencing residents' wellbeing.

Conclusion

The paper has answered the questions posed regarding the differences and commonalities between informal housing in Caracas (Global South) and Sydney (Global North), and the perceived effects of informal housing on residents' wellbeing from their perspective. Thus,

these findings broaden the knowledge and comprehension of informality and wellbeing by opening a new approach to the residents' positive experiences.

However, there are still some other reflective and challenging questions we should be asking ourselves and guiding future enquiries: how can we redefine informal and precarious housing through understanding residents' perspectives? How do we then redefine wellbeing in informal conditions? If people put much effort into building their houses and making the best of their experience, should we be the ones defining it as informal or precarious? When safety is guaranteed, is looking for profitability really that condemnable? Are the owners or tenants who sublet these spaces really exploiting vulnerable populations, or are they just supplying for a market left out by the authorities? Do these residents really see themselves as exploited and vulnerable? Where is the matter of choice? These questions are controversial and have no easy answer.

The Caracas and Sydney cases cannot be generalised. However, they give hints with regards to the assumptions of the link between informality and wellbeing and the perceptions residents have on their own housing experience that are worth following on other cities, other types of informal housing and other populations. In the end, the topics of housing and wellbeing are about people and how they relate to their place (regardless of our "expert" view).

Additionally, the phenomena of informal housing and wellbeing are permanent and evolving topics, which raises some of the limitations of this study leading to future research in these specific contexts. Firstly, with the changing and complex Venezuelan political and economic environment, people have been fleeing to different countries worldwide, especially to other South American destinations. In these, Venezuelans are facing the same living conditions of precariousness hidden in the visible formal city, which is a situation that needs to be studied.

Finally, in the case of Sydney, the focus on students, and especially international ones, should be broadened as this is just one of the populations living in precariousness. As expressed by many participants, working holiday visa holders experience these housing conditions too, as well as other groups such as migrants and refugees. Understanding people's perspectives, concerns, and needs is fundamental to finding a more effective and practical *solution* to informal housing.

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