

# Public Space in Informal Settlements



Public Space in Informal Settlements:  
The Barrios of Bogotá

By

Jaime Hernández-García

**CAMBRIDGE**  
**SCHOLARS**

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P U B L I S H I N G

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by Jaime Hernández-García

This book first published 2013

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data  
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-4438-5128-0, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-5128-2

I wish to dedicate this work to my wife Celia and my daughter Laura Valentina, with all my love. Also to my parents and sister, Hector, Esperanza and Iliana.



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## PREFACE

With some notable exceptions, faculties of architecture and planning throughout the world continue to train students for a future which is planned, designed and constructed exclusively by professionals. Many seem not to have noticed, or prefer to ignore, the increasingly obvious reality that most construction in the world today is not in the hands of professionals but is produced by largely unskilled, low income people. This means that the cities of the global south are expanding rapidly through the growth of popular settlements - with ordinary people as the key protagonists, producing urban environments on a scale unprecedented in history.

This study by Jaime Hernandez-Garcia is focused on the processes and practices whereby such informal settlements come into being and are progressively consolidated. But contrary to the majority of studies he engages not with the dwellings and houses themselves, but with the open spaces between them: the streets, squares, parks and playgrounds. Such spaces are not simply vital for the effective functioning of the settlements, but play a key role in defining the character of the communities which create and use them. For example, he charts in impressive detail how for many settlers the central plaza is not simply a place for gathering, for celebration and for commerce, but is the symbolic focus of their new lives, and plays a fundamental role in defining and consolidating the new identity of both the settlements and the settlers.

Part of the value of this study is his micro scale analysis of spaces and the activities which take place within them. We learn not only about the constructive, collaborative endeavours of communities to improve their facilities and environments, but also of the tensions and conflicts which are part of a complex and dynamic urban reality. He confirms that open public spaces areas are not just the concern of the affluent middle classes, but are essential for all urban citizens. Indeed they are arguably even more important for the poor majorities who live at much higher densities and make much more effective use of all available public spaces for recreation, work and everyday social interactions

Without such careful analysis it might appear that such settlements are established and developed exclusively through informal practices - apparently independently of dominant structures and formal processes.

However the paradigm of formality and informality as discrete and bounded binaries has been challenged in recent years by a number of theorists including Roy and AlSayyad (2004). They identify multiple reciprocal relationships between the two sectors and explain how they are closely interconnected, not least through official structures which aim to control or support informal practices through a range of possible intervention strategies.

Such interconnections are clearly demonstrated in this study. Bogotá is a particularly appropriate choice because in recent years the city has benefited from enlightened and progressive city administrations which have made serious efforts to engage with the majority of the population when designing social and planning programmes. This has meant that many settlements which began illegally and have developed in contravention of municipal guidelines and regulations are now supported in different ways through a range of innovative official initiatives. His case studies of the *Obras con Saldo Pedagógico –OSP–* (Works with an Educational Outcome) and *Obras con Participación Ciudadana –OPC–* (Works with Citizens' Participation) programmes illustrate how such reciprocity works in practice and offers useful insights which are relevant to administrations in other places.

This book adds to Jaime Hernandez-Garcia's impressive academic trajectory. His architectural studies in Bogotá were followed by postgraduate studies at the University of York and later at IHS in Rotterdam. He then obtained a scholarship from The European Union Programme of High Level for Latin America, –ALBAN– to study for his PhD at Newcastle University where I was privileged to be his supervisor. Jaime proved to be an outstanding doctoral student and this book draws heavily on the work of his PhD, which he completed with characteristic efficiency and speed – no doubt an echo of his equally impressive performance as a triathlon athlete. The high quality of his PhD thesis was recognised by others including the Mexican Social Housing Institute (INFONAVIT) and the Scientific Information Index (REDALYC) which awarded him the prestigious "Ibero-American Prize for Research on Sustainable Housing and Urban Space" in 2011 (Hernandez-Garcia 2012). Jaime has spent many years studying the low-income settlements of Bogotá with his students at the Javeriana University who continue to benefit enormously from his experience and knowledge. This book makes such valuable work available to a wider international audience who I am confident will gain significantly from his analysis and insights.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book, coming from my doctoral studies, could not have been accomplished without the participation of a large number of people who over the years gave me their support, sympathy and solidarity. Firstly, my principal PhD supervisor, Dr. Peter Kellett, a person with the highest academic and personal qualities. He was always ready to discuss and confront my ideas; but also to offer guidance, support and advice on arguably any theme and concern. I am also in debt with my second supervisor, Dr. Graham Tipple, who revised my work several times and made important suggestions. In the University of Newcastle Upon Tyne, and in particular in the School of Architecture, Planning and Landscape, many contributed directly and indirectly with comments, ideas and recommendations.

In practical terms the opportunity to do the doctorate was thanks to the ALBAN Programme, and the *Pontificia Universidad Javeriana*. The European Union Programme of High Level Scholarships for Latin America, ALBAN, contributed significantly to cover tuition fees and living expenses. Similarly the Javeriana University in Bogota, under the *Formacion del Profesor Javeriano* programme, provided me with additional funds towards the costs of studying and living in UK. I am deeply grateful to these institutions for having supported me, not only in financial terms, but also with advice and information access.

As important as the financial support, was the emotional and everyday sustenance. This was given by my family, both in Newcastle and Bogota. My wife, Celia, and my daughter Laura Valentina, were constant in their support and companionship. The three of us undertook this “adventure” of living and experiencing a different country, and although it was not always easy, we all found our way, learned and enjoyed the experience. But my parents and sister in Bogota; Hector, Esperanza and Iliana, were also very important. They were not in Newcastle, but it was as if they were; their permanent communication and interest helped us very much.

Some words are deserved to all the people I met over the years in Newcastle. Arguably they were important because they showed me something different from my daily study routine, and in that sense helped me to balance the study experience, and offered me a broader understanding of the city and its social dynamics. First, the Latin American community in

Newcastle, almost invisible at the beginning but once you find one, you find them all. Sharing language, food, weather complaints and nostalgic images were the main plans; paradoxically these helped me to connect with the city and with my own country at the same time. The sports groups in which I took part were also important: “The City of Newcastle Swimming Team”, “The Claremont Road Runners”, and “The Newcastle Outdoor Activities Group”, many thanks to these good people.

Last but not least, my deepest thanks to the people in the *barrios* of Bogota, who openly and kindly offered me their ideas and comments to carry out my research. Don Arturo, Don Idelfonso, Don Marco Fidel, Don Jose, Doña Lucy, Doña Rosa, Don Tito, Doña Rocio, Doña Lidya, Don Luis Emilio, Doña Maria, Doña Carmen, Doña Martha; and many others. Without their help this research could not have been possible. I hope it can contribute to a better understanding of their environments and in that sense contribute to improve their living conditions.



## INTRODUCTION

# INFORMAL, POPULAR OR (EXTRA)ORDINARY SETTLEMENTS?

We moved to Aguas Claras in 1992. I still remember the day; it was the 18<sup>th</sup> of April, a rainy day. The car that we had hired to bring our things could not reach the *barrio*, because the track was unpaved and rough and it could be stuck. My mum and I had to walk nearly a kilometre, in the rain and pulling our things up the mountain. It was a difficult arrival, and on the top of that, we felt miserable and sad; we had left our previous *barrio* in the other end of the city to be in this almost deserted land. The only good thing was that we were arriving to our own piece of land. There were few houses, but most of the streets were clearly established. Our plot was marked out but was full of bushes; it was hard to clear it and start making our first home. We did not know where the park was, but we knew it was somewhere. (Rocio, resident of Aguas Clara's *barrio*, 2008)

### **Informal, Popular or (*Extra*)Ordinary Settlements?**

This book is about informal settlements in Bogota. It is an enquiry into public spaces: what they are, how they work, and what they mean to people. My interest in the subject is both professional and personal, but is also linked to the urban and social realities of Colombian cities. I became aware of informal settlements well after I had finished my architecture studies in Bogota, despite the fact that for a long time these settlements have constituted more than half of the city. During my undergraduate architecture studies there were a few workshops on the subject, but for most of us it was a “marginal” topic, not so interesting compared with projects addressing the “formal” minority city. This perception by architecture students and schools has not changed much, irrespective of the size and the social and urban complexity of informal settlements. In my case, gradually, during my first assignments as an architect and my further studies, the subject has become clearer, more significant and increasingly fascinating. For nearly twenty years since then, I have been exploring the topic from different perspectives and for different purposes:

practice, research and consultancy. However, an empirical approach has been the usual pattern of those activities with little chance to reflect on the subject itself and on its theoretical and methodological implications. This research is my opportunity to carry out this reflection.

Although this study derives from a professional and personal interest over many years, the topic has been the object of a recent resurgence of attention among academics and practitioners alike (in addition to the extensive work of Latin American academics for more than 50 years), and this trend has also motivated this study. Examples of this higher profile include the Urban Think Tank's book "Informal City, the Caracas Case" (2005), the Harvard Design Magazine special issue "Can designers improve life in non-formal cities? (2008) and the book "Rethinking the Informal City" by Hernandez, Kellett and Allen (2010). However, these "new" understandings that promote different and alternative ways to perceive informal settlements co-exist with "old" ideas and perspectives. Among the "old", which remains current thinking, strongly influencing policies in Colombia, is the idea of the existence of two cities within the city: the formal and planned alongside the informal, unplanned and illegal, which "is the result of an urban, speculative and chaotic process of peripheral development, with no roads, transport and public services"<sup>1</sup> (Rueda Garcia 2000, 2). In this regard, despite interesting exceptions (especially at the municipality level which aim to upgrade these areas), policies are mainly designed to prevent these practices, eradicate these settlements whenever and wherever possible, and build new houses in other areas of the city in which to relocate people. Needless to say, these policies have achieved very limited results.

Informal housing is shooting up, illegal dwellings increased by 17% in the last few years (La vivienda informal esta "disparada", edificaciones ilegales subieron 17% en los últimos años. "El Tiempo", May 11<sup>th</sup>, 2010).

This theme of settlement development figures importantly in the international arena nowadays, but clearly more and better understanding is needed about the Colombian approach.

The "old" views on informal settlements have limitations, but the "new" ones have been challenged as well. Varley (2009) argues that this new literature on informal settlements may promote misleading perceptions, overlooking what exists behind those superficial impressions: the precariousness of the housing and the struggle of the people. Also, recent writings may give the wrong message to governments, as Torres and Castillo (2009) explain. They ask for structural changes in developmental policies in Colombia, because local and creative actions by people and

organisations cannot on their own deal with the expanding and complex phenomenon of informal settlements. However this “new” literature argues that informality is not necessarily a problem, rather it can be an opportunity; in other words it can be seen as an alternative mode of production of space (Roy 2009). For Brillembourg Tamayo, Feireiss *et al.* (2005), informal settlements are the urban present and future for a large portion of the population in Latin America, and they could even be the key for the 21<sup>st</sup> century in terms of richness, inventiveness and achievement. Firstly, these “new” ideas on informality acknowledge its value as a valid approach to urban space production. Secondly, they challenge binary and marginalising discourses such as formal/informal, legal/illegal, planned/unplanned and so on. They seek to see these settlements as they are, as parts of cities, with problems, opportunities and even with lessons for others about integrity, inclusion and diversity (Fiori and Brandao 2010, 190). Finally, the third contribution of these ideas is that they recognise the people behind the houses and the urban space. “The informal sector has emerged as a complex system of social interactions” (Ramirez 2010, 138), as informal settlements are far more than houses and streets – they are people interacting with spaces. The dynamics of informal settlements go much beyond deficits of housing and urban facilities, as is the common currency in Colombian policies. These ideas are at the heart of this research, especially from the perspective of people and place interactions and how this relationship influences both the social and the physical aspects of the *barrio*. In the light of all these points, what is an appropriate term for the subject of this research which avoids binary and marginalising discourses. In this regard, post-colonial ideas come to mind, when one considers the argument that all cities – and parts of cities – should be called “ordinary”:

Rather than categorising and labelling cities as, for example, Western, Third World, developed, developing, world or global, I propose that we think about a world of ordinary cities, which are all dynamic and diverse, if conflicted, arenas for social and economic life. (Robinson 2006, 1)

These settlements therefore could perhaps be called “ordinary”, with some extraordinary social, architectural and urban characteristics and challenges. This nomenclature also helps to approach them as they are, avoiding comparison with other parts of the city or with global ideas of informality. It would also accord with the purpose of this research to produce and value knowledge from the places themselves, the *barrios* in this case. Although these issues of definition are important for this research, they could cause confusion. Even though these settlements

should be considered as ordinary in terms of how to approach them, they are non-ordinary in many aspects. In this regard, I will call them informal or popular settlements<sup>2</sup>, but the “ordinariness” of the approach will be maintained. There are several other terms used in the literature to refer to these settlements, including: low income settlements and *barrios*. These two terms will be applied interchangeably to informal and popular; firstly, because it is the way that they appear in the literature studied; and secondly, for practical reasons.

## **Public or Open Spaces? The Relation between People and Place**

This research investigates popular settlements, and the standpoint from which to see them lies in “public spaces”. Personal and professional reasons assisted me when deciding on the term to use. On the personal side, public space – as I used to call it – was a topic relatively unknown to me when applied to popular settlements. During my architectural studies the subject was largely covered from the perspective of the “formal” city, but almost nothing was said about the “informal” part of the city. In the following years I had little direct contact with the subject because my main practice and research interests were based on housing; public space was something “additional”, something with apparently little importance for popular settlers. This personal perception, partially supported in the literature – or the lack of it – changed gradually until a few years before commencing this research, when I started to explore the issue in the *barrios*. Part of this exploration and fieldwork has been integrated into this research. At one point professional reasons entered into this process. The limited literature available on the subject – especially when compared to that on housing – and the need for a better understanding of these places in the context of the *barrios*, encouraged me to consider the importance of open space. Once this research started and the initial literature was reviewed, I could confirm my early observations and reinforce my interest in researching open public spaces in informal settlements.

One of my first concerns was that, according to the literature, “public space” is not an accurate description of the places I wanted to research.

If a place is equally accessible to everyone, irrespective of their physical abilities, age, gender, ethnicity, income level and social status, it can be called a public space (Madanipour 2010, 242).

This definition opens up a range of possible considerations and it can be argued that no space is 100% equally accessible to everyone. This is the case of public spaces in the *barrios*, which are not entirely public; they are in terms of accessibility (to a certain extent) and ownership (most of them), but not in terms of use. This impacts on their accessibility. These spaces are closer to the communal, in which outsiders are identified and are not always welcome. Their entrance is not physically prevented, but they know they are in someone else's place. That was my experience when beginning the fieldwork, and only after I had visited a particular place several times and had got to know some of the people, did I feel that I had the right to be there, at least as a welcome visitor. When exploring the literature in depth I found that public is a complex concept embedded in the dialectic between private and public with social, cultural and political implications. However, evidence in the *barrios* suggests it is a question of the relationship between inside the house and outside in the street, as Riaño (1990) argues, rather than a dichotomy between private and public. With this in mind, open spaces looks appropriate for identifying these places for the purposes of this research. However, and in the same sense as the term informal settlements, public spaces will be used interchangeably to open spaces for literature and stylistic reasons.

Kohn (2004) identifies three components of a public space: ownership, accessibility and intersubjectivity. Ownership is related to public property, accessibility is about allowing entrance to everyone without restrictions, and intersubjectivity refers to fostering communication and interaction. Ownership may be understood similarly in contrasting the open spaces of the *barrios* with those of the city, but accessibility and intersubjectivity are seen differently. This can be explained – and will be argued in this study – as the result of the close relationship between people and place. The open spaces of the *barrios* have particular characteristics because of their connection with the people. In other words they are socially produced and constructed. These twofold and overlapping concepts help explain how physical materiality is transformed, expressed and made meaningful. The interest, therefore, of this research is to explore the relationship between people and place in the public spaces of popular settlements. This relationship has been acknowledged in the literature; for example Holloway and Hubbard (2001, 7) argue that “it has become axiomatic in human geography that as people construct places, places construct people (inferring the reciprocity between people and place)”; or Carmona (2010, 158): “urban public space shapes and is shaped by society – its power relationships, priorities and its fears”. The idea is therefore, to investigate these relationships in the public spaces of the *barrios*.

Although open spaces in popular settlements are seldom studied in Colombia compared for example with housing issues, the current and somewhat limited vision of them can be seen from at least three perspectives. The first is the “institutional” view, evident in national policies, which aims to prevent popular settlements flourishing and if possible eradicate and relocate them. In this context, where interest is mainly placed on housing and infrastructure, open spaces are rarely discussed. The second vision found in some municipal policies and programmes especially in Bogota, centres round the belief that massive interventions in open spaces of the *barrios*, such as parks and boulevards, can contribute to upgrading these areas and improving living conditions. Partly inspired by the *Favela Bairro* programme in Brazil which promoted open spaces as social integrators, there is “a strong reliance on the role that public space can play in bringing people together, stressing the importance of quality design and architecture” (Riley, Ramirez *et al.* 2001, 527). Although the recent projects developed in Bogota are important, they are relatively limited in size and impact compared to the dimension of city and the people’s needs. The third perspective is related to the production and use of these places, and is concerned with documenting social practices and open space appropriation. In the Colombian context the works of Riaño (1990), Saldarriaga (1997), Viviescas (1996), Rojas and Guerrero (1997), Niño and Chaparro (1997), and Avendaño and Carvajalino (2000) constitute the main referents for this subject. This study, informed by the two first perspectives, aims to contribute to the debate of the third, the relation between people and place, and the design language and meanings associated with the materiality observed as a result.

## **Objectives, Themes and Research Questions**

This study explores the relationship between people and public spaces in the informal settlements of Bogota. People in these areas are developing their own built environments through their own ideas, initiatives and economic possibilities. The research aims to understand how *barrio* open spaces work and the ways in which local users produce, use, transform, express and give meaning to those places. Public spaces in popular settlements, like the housing stock, are to a large extent the product of local self-help and self-management processes; however, a commensurate level of understanding has not been achieved, partly because they are often seen as spare spaces with little value. However, since the early stages of the *barrio* formation they play an important role in the physical and social dynamics of the settlements, although the improvement and consolidation

of such spaces may not be realised for several years. By studying open spaces, this research also intends to contribute to the debate on popular settlements by viewing them as an opportunity to understand different ways of thinking about the city.

The objectives of the study are:

1. To identify and characterise public spaces in informal settlements in physical and social terms.
2. To examine public space production and transformation processes, and the different actors involved.
3. To investigate public spaces consumption patterns, from both functional and symbolic perspectives.
4. To explore form, design language and meanings associated with public spaces, and reflect on their relationship to production and consumption practices.
5. To contribute to the understanding of informal settlements and their potential to build city and community.

Three main themes will be covered theoretically and empirically in order to pursue the objectives proposed: informal settlements, public spaces, and the people-place relationship. The first is arguably the context and frame of the research; it also represents the final aim of the study. The second is the standpoint from which popular settlements are to be viewed, analysed and discussed. The third constitutes the theoretical and methodological tools used to conduct the enquiry. In practice, the three themes are linked together and make sense in their interrelation. The theoretical exploration identifies the key subjects aims to offer a balanced discussion between structural reasoning and recent alternative visions of the city.

In brief, theme one is about traditional and recent visions on informal settlements, explaining how the understanding of them has changed through time but with issues such as informality remaining as a central characteristic. Theme two explores open spaces from a general perspective and gradually focuses on popular settlements; however, specific literature on open spaces in the *barrios* tends to be less frequent, indicating a gap of knowledge in this area. Theme three investigates people-and-place relationships from three perspectives: 1) the social production of space; 2) the social construction of space; and 3) the design language and meaning of space.

These themes are oriented by the following research questions:

- 1) How is public space designed, built, managed, transformed and sustained? Public spaces in informal settlements, like housing, are

largely produced and transformed by the people themselves, by the users. However there is little understanding of how they work, partly because these places are generally considered unimportant both with regard to the popular settlers and the city alike. This question investigates the production process of public spaces, inquiring into the development procedures, the actors involved and the roles played, as well as the upgrading strategies.

- 2) What is the relationship between public spaces and the people (users) who create them? *Barrio* public spaces are mostly used by the people who live nearby. They are also used by others who live and/or work in the same area, with the occasionally observed presence of outsiders. These spaces are consumed in two ways: functional and symbolic. The first may be understood as concerning physical and everyday use, the second as the experiential and representational. Both usages generate different levels of people-place relationship, and at the same time these exchanges influence the people and the place. This question investigates the consumption of open spaces in the *barrios* and its implications.
- 3) What is the form, language and meaning of public spaces and how can it be understood and interpreted? Public spaces in the *barrios* are closely related to the informal settlers, and this relationship is manifest in the built environment. The richness and creativity that can be found suggest the existence of a design language in these areas. This question is about how to understand and interpret this tangible and observable production.

In sum, this research aims to develop greater understanding of the spatial and social dynamics of informal settlements. In particular about public space which has been traditionally overlooked in these settlements. It is mainly supported by qualitative and context-dependent data; however findings can be explanatory for similar contexts, namely Colombia and Latin America. This study is not directly policy-oriented, however it is hoped that discussions could inform policy debates. Last but not least, it is believed that this study could contribute in some way to improving living conditions in these settlements, by creating awareness of potentials and difficulties.

### **The Research Setting: Informal Settlements in Bogota**

The research location is Bogota, my home town. But there are other reasons to select Bogota, the capital city of Colombia. Colombia, as with

the rest of Latin America, is highly urbanised with more than 70% of its population living in urban areas (Worldbank 2007). Bogota is the largest urban agglomeration, and with nearly 7 million inhabitants easily surpasses the other large Colombian cities like Medellin, Cali or Barranquilla, with close to 2 million each (DANE 2007). “From the distance, Bogota looks anything but the supposedly impoverished Latin American metropolis” (Gilbert 1998, 2). It is the economic hub of the country, with per capita income over 140% above the national average and 15 points higher than the rest of the country in the quality of life index (Worldbank 2007). The last four municipal administrations have greatly improved the city with public spaces, libraries, schools and transport. However, this welfare has never been shared by the majority, according to a municipal report (2000) 49.6% of the population was below the poverty line which is nearly the same percentage of the existing urban areas that began as informal settlements (Martin Molano 2000). However, despite their scale, these settlements are not easily seen at first glance because popular settlements in Bogota are normally located on the periphery. They are characterised by great shortages of economic and urban formal resources such as infrastructure and social services, and in many cases deficiencies in housing as well. The origin of these settlements is usually through one or a combination of the following processes: the “standard way” (purchasing of developed or undeveloped plots from public or private companies), clandestine (plots that are sold by illegal developers), or land invasion. Indistinct as to their origins, many of these settlements gradually move towards consolidation thanks to self-build and self-help practices.

Informal settlements in Bogota are a dynamic part of the city in physical, economic, social and cultural terms. Their development is largely determined by the inhabitants themselves. They are either informally or formally initiated, but after a few years it is no longer possible to confirm the origin of a specific part or the whole of them. They are constantly undergoing change and transformation, frequently with minimum support from public or private bodies.

Informal settlements are by definition unfinished projects in which the agency and creativity of the occupant-builders is central, in contrast to architect-produced architecture which emphasises the physical form of the buildings often at the expense of users (Kellett 2008, 11).

Against the above panorama, 57 public spaces in informal settlements in Bogota were chosen for this study. They are located in the four corners of the city and contain various types of spaces: streets, stairways,

recreation parks, contemplative parks (or passive parks, as communities refer to them), and in various combinations. These cases correspond to data collected prior to the current research, and are used as “general” cases. Among them, six cases were selected to deepen the enquiry with further detailed fieldwork carried out for this research. The case studies are focussed on the main open space of the *barrio*, which in most of them is the *cancha* (*barrio* park); but also includes neighbouring streets and stairs and open areas interacting with them.

## **Methodology**

A number of issues were taken into consideration when designing the methodology. From questioning about enquiry and explanation to incorporating and reflecting on nearly 20 years of experience in the field. In other words, how to “use” this research to reflect on that mainly empirical experience. Ideas were found along the way with literature and reflection, and in data terms it was decided to incorporate previous and appropriate accumulated information with more recently collected fieldwork data.

A qualitative approach was employed because of the nature of the research questions which aim to explore processes, interpretations and relationships. However some basic quantitative techniques were used for the 57 cases to identify trends and for descriptive purposes, as well as providing a general understanding and as a framework for the exploration of the six detailed case studies. The main methods used for data collection were observation and semi-structured interviews complemented by mapping, informal conversations, photography, photo-elicitation and documentary sources. The general cases were analysed in terms of common features and patterns which helped to identify themes and make. This information was useful when approaching the specific cases which were analysed following traditional qualitative data procedures of code, memo, categorise and classify (Miles and Huberman 1994). Six draft reports were prepared, one for each case, where analysis and preliminary findings were discussed. These reports along with the analysis of the general cases constitute the main data sources for interpretation and argument building.

## **The Structure of the Book**

This book consists of five chapters, introduction and conclusion. Following this introductory section, the first and second chapters set up the

theoretical, methodological and physical and social context framework for this research. Chapters three, four and five discuss the production, use and form, language and meaning of public spaces in informal settlements. Each chapter examines a particular subject, guided by each of the three research questions. However, as it will be discussed further on, the relationship between the three subjects is close; it can be argued that each one is the cause and the consequence of the others. This is reflected throughout the study, but becomes clearer in chapter five where the three subjects converge explicitly. Finally, the conclusions presents the final arguments of the research.

Chapter One, **Informal Settlements and Public Spaces: Themes and Theories**, examines the literature on five issues. Firstly, historic, current and alternative views on informal settlements: discussing the changing interpretations from illegal, marginal and problematic to proactive ideas which consider them “as a way of life” (AlSayyad 2004, 27), and the possible key to urban development of Latin America cities (Brillembourg Tamayo, Feireiss *et al.* 2005). Secondly, ideas on urban outdoor spaces are explored, focusing on informal settlements. However, in contrast to the literature found on informal settlements and housing, literature on “informal” urban spaces is limited, showing a gap of knowledge in this area. The last three sections of the chapter correspond to one of the research questions, which further on illuminates the discussion of the analytical chapters. The first investigates the production of urban space which in the *barrios* is undertaken largely by the people. The second examines the use of place or the social construction of space. The last section presents theories and concepts on how the built environment observed in informal settlements can be understood.

Chapter Two, **The Context of the Study: Place, Methodology and Case Studies**, describes the research setting, the approach to the study, the criteria used for the collection, analysis and interpretation of data, and present the case studies. A brief introduction to Bogota’s urban development followed by a discussion of informal settlements in the city; their evolution, current situation, and the policies and programmes. Then, public spaces in the *barrios* are examined focussing on municipality programmes and the actors involved. Within a qualitative approach the methods and analysis are discussed. The collection, analysis and interpretation of two sets of data from different time frames and with different specifications was the major methodological challenge. Finally, the cases in which the dynamics of production, use, language and meaning are explored.

Chapter Three, **The Production of Informal Public Space**, is the first of three analytical chapters which explore the research findings. The chapter examines the social production of public space in informal settlements, exploring the dynamics of organisation and development, as well as the actors involved and the roles they play. It explains how the production of space in the *barrios* is primarily defined by the people, building a close relationship between people and place and influencing both the space and social interactions. It also examines how this is a permanent transformation process that is marked by internal and external conflicts.

Chapter Four, **Public Space and Users: Functional and Symbolic Interactions**, focuses on the use of public spaces in the *barrios* from different perspectives. It engages with the transformation of space through social construction, by means of tangible and intangible interactions. Similar to production, the consumption of public spaces is mainly effected by the *barrio* dwellers, with almost no outsiders using those places. In this regard, the relationship between people and place is enhanced. This chapter examines the functional, experiential and symbolic usages of public spaces, which contribute to shape the places but also affect social relations and interactions.

Chapter Five, **Language, Form and Meaning**, discusses the tangible product in terms of form, language and meaning that is arguably linked to social production and construction practices, but also to creativity and choice. The chapter demonstrates that the design language found in *barrio* public spaces goes far beyond poverty and survival issues and is linked it to complex, overlapping and intense meanings. It examines the form of public spaces, the existence of typologies and other planning tools, and the role of green areas and urban furniture. It also looks at the aesthetics of the place from several perspectives and concludes with language and meaning arguments.

The final section, **Conclusion: Beyond Ordinary Public Spaces**, presents the concluding arguments. The various arguments involved in the study are drawn together and discussed, linking the main theoretical claims with the empirical investigation. It is confirmed the richness of informal settlements in terms of social and physical structures and the need to go beyond binary constructions of formal/informal and legal/illegal which lead to consider these areas as solely marginal and problematic. It also argues that public spaces in the *barrios* play an important role from the beginning of the settlements, and connect closely with the people, influencing social relations but also transforming places.

# CHAPTER ONE

## INFORMAL SETTLEMENTS AND PUBLIC SPACES: THEMES AND THEORIES

Before the industrial revolution, people provided themselves with shelter mainly through self-help and self-building. With technical developments and a growing economy, these practices were left to the more disadvantaged groups, especially in urban areas, and gradually lapsed from the formal procedures of the economy and the city. Urban expansion in the last five decades has contributed to the phenomenon of informal housing and informal settlements in general. In 2001, more than 75% of Latin Americans were living in cities, while over 30% (128 million) of this urban population were estimated to be living in conditions defined by the United Nations as slums (UNCHS 2003, 14). These figures may increase in the future, as new urban populations will require housing, public services and some kind of social welfare. Slums are characterised by lack of basic services, substandard housing or illegal and inadequate building structures, overcrowding and high density, unhealthy living conditions and hazardous locations, insecure tenure, poverty and social exclusion, and minimal settlement size (UNCHS 2003).

Although these figures bring the significance of the subject into sharp relief, this book is not about numbers or about defining these settlements solely in terms of what they lack, for the purposes of some kind of “catch-up approach”; or, as Robinson (2006, 11) characterises it: “the imaginative straightjacket of imitative urbanism and the regulating fiction of catching up to the wealthier”. The UNCHS report (2003, 9) recognises there is not a universal characterisation of these settlements and “today, the catch-all term ‘slum’ is loose and deprecatory”. This research is about understanding these settlements and the inter-relationships with their residents, the local users, qualitatively, through an insufficiently-studied topic: public spaces in the *barrios*. One of the first tasks, therefore, was to decide upon an appropriate term for these settlements. In the literature several cognate terms can be identified: for example, shanty, squatter,

irregular, marginal, spontaneous, un-planned, informal and so on (see more in Payne 1989; Gilbert 2007). Most are defined in the negative, although the term “informal” may include a positive recognition of people’s involvement in their production and transformation, as Kellett (2008) argues.

The term informal, however, is not beyond debate, which will be addressed in this chapter and throughout the book. It was decided, therefore, to use the term commonly applied to these areas in Latin America, and particularly in Colombia, which is “popular settlements” (*asentamientos populares*). At the same time, for the sake of stylistic variety, informal settlements and *barrios* will be used interchangeably, and other characterisations when appropriate.

This chapter will examine the existing literature in order to provide an overview of the key themes and theories that govern this research. The chapter, then, is divided into five sections; the first two sections look at the contextual themes of the research: informal settlements and public spaces; while the three following sections discuss the ideas and concepts which will frame the analysis of the subject. While, for structural reasons, these sections are developed independently, it is noted that the themes are closely interconnected. Public spaces, being part and parcel of the urban creation and consolidation processes of informal settlements, cannot therefore be read as supplementary or marginal to informal settlers’ needs or experience. By the same token, the production, consumption and language of space are parts of the same unity, and as will emerge in the text, a discussion about production easily broaches ideas of consumption, and language is itself understood on basis of the production and consumption of space.

## **Informal Settlements**

### **Historical and Traditional Perspectives**

The literature on informal settlements begins around the 1960s, when the issue had become visible enough to attract attention. Encouraged by certain government agencies and inspired by the economic model for industrial and urban development which then prevailed, cities in Latin America underwent rapid urbanisation. Accounting for less than 40% of the population in the 1950s, by the beginning of the 1990s urban dwellers had come to represent 72% of the entire population (Gilbert 1998, 26). Rural-urban migration was at the centre of this growth, bringing massive numbers of people to cities which were not fully capable of accommodating

them, forcing them to look out for themselves and to find alternative dwellings in informal settlements. Informal settlements were soon seen as a problem needing to be solved, both in terms of governments providing housing for people and in terms of eradicating these unplanned developments that had started to appear within and at the edges of cities. These settlements were illegal, and considered marginal and problematic. It was argued – and it is still the case for some elite groups in local contexts and for some public agencies around the world – that disadvantaged groups would remain poor and marginal, that they were incapable, unaided, of making any improvement to their lives and to their physical environments. Such views were propounded by Oscar Lewis as part of his work on Mexico, linking them with the “culture of poverty” and the “culture of marginality” (Lewis 1963, 1966). This interpretation was, however, contested in the works of Mangin (1967) in Peru and Perlman in Brazil (1976), which refuted these “myths of marginality” and other such common misconceptions.

But one of the major shifts in the approach to the subject was consolidated through John Turner’s extensive research undertaken inside the *barriadas* (*barrios*) of Lima. This brought to light what poor people could do to organise and improve their houses and their living environments (Turner and Fichter 1972; Turner 1976). He suggested that informal settlements – far from being a problem – could be a solution to the question of housing and urban services; that those living there know best how to prioritise and use resources and meet their own needs. The idea of progressive development began to be documented here, and is still one of the main approaches in the study of informal housing and settlements. Turner’s idea of supported self-help was promoted and funded across many countries in the 1970s and 1980s through the World Bank’s programme of sites and services; however, this view has had its opponents since its inception. It is seen as a way for governments to evade responsibility for the structural social and economic problems which are at the heart of finding “real” solutions to urban growth (Butterworth and Chance 1981). It is also seen as a way of exerting social control: “By and large, community participation has been used by governments as a means of legitimating the political system,” (Gilbert and Ward 1984, 780) and creating a “dependent” relationship between the government and disadvantaged communities, whereby the former “tolerates” land occupations and informal upgrades in order to avoid confrontation and keep the city functioning (Gilbert, Hardoy *et al.* 1982; Gilbert and Ward 1985).

In Colombia these perspectives are very much alive, both in policy debate and in academic discussions, and alongside them people continue building and transforming their living environments largely through their own means. At the same time, new evidence and theoretical approaches have enriched the discussion and have shed further light on the subject. These will be presented immediately after a brief discussion on what is possibly the “core” issue of informal settlements: their informality.

### **Informality**

Informality in Latin America operates at a scale beyond the settlement level: for many it represents a type of economic development. Informality also applies to social and cultural practices, qualifying expressions and manifestations which are not part of the mainstream. “Informal” is usually defined as the opposite of “formal”: in economic terms, the formal is the capitalist, neoliberal and global economy; in urbanism, the formal is the planned, institutional and legal city; in cultural terms, the formal is arguably the contemporary version of the established traditions. Furthermore, formal may imply legality, while informal may impute illegality. However, complications inevitably arise from such distinctions, because it is often difficult to distinguish between what is legal and what is illegal, and this can depend on the way law is applied. A settlement may start out as “illegal” or “informal”, but after a period of time it is legalised; while in other cases, it would be difficult to judge if the settlement is legal or illegal, formal or informal. In addition, the size of the informal sector has increased rapidly, so that it is of equal dimensions to the formal, or even larger. Informal labour in Latin America in 2005 was undertaken by 48.5% of the population (International Labour Organization, cited in Donovan 2008, 32). Regarding building:

In some cities, these informal submarkets have grown so rapidly that they now represent a majority of the entire housing stock and are the most common means poorer households obtain residential land and housing (Payne 1989, 1).

Currently, in many circumstances it can be difficult to distinguish the informal from the formal, and what is more, to be sure that to “become formal” is the residents’ objective; in other words, that the tacit journey from the informal towards the formal is possible and/or desired.

The informal economic sector in Latin America can help us to understand aspects of informal settlements. For Hernando De Soto (1987), the informal economy is “the other path” to economic development, a