8.1 The improvised city: contributions of informal dwelling towards an expanded paradigm of the metropolis. The case of Porto, Portugal

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✕ ~~Abstract~~

Acknowledging the importance of dominant global discourses and aesthetics in the validation of a hegemonic urban development model that reinforces urban inequality, this paper addresses the need for narratives and representations that challenge current paradigms. Taking the city of Porto as a case study, we hypothesize that within this context, the acknowledgment and valuation of informal dwelling may provide relevant contributions to the construction of such alternative discourses. Delving into the aesthetics and the implicit politics of informal dwelling, we examine its contributions towards aesthetic and social diversity, and the opportunities it presents for participation in the construction of Western urban landscapes. Contrasting the emanant visual character of informal dwelling with hegemonic representations and re-branding narratives in the city of Porto, the paper brings light to a ubiquitous, yet disregarded reality that may bring crucial inputs to a purposeful debate on diversity, equity, and democracy in urban environments.

Keywords: informal dwelling, gentrification, Porto, counter-hegemonic discourse, countervisuality.

Introduction

In the city of Porto, as in many other "heritage-rich European cities" mass tourism and real estate speculation have been transforming the physical environment, as well as the social fabric and economic activity (Fernandes *et al.,* 2018, p. 183). Under the rule of global neoliberalism, developing cities as competitive products, most often targeting external consumers and investors has been turning cities into destinations[4], historic centres into 'theme parks' (Solá-Morales, 2016), and empty buildings into financial assets (Bismarck, 2019). As residents' needs are not at the centre of such development strategies, the city has become unaffordable even for middle-income citizens.

This development model is supported by local reproductions of global discourses and aesthetics that foster processes of gentrification and spatial segregation, tending to reinforce urban inequality. The branding

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4. Porto was elected European Best Destination in 2012, 2014 and 2017, a distinction awarded by a website dedicated to European tourism promotion. A campaign was launched to support the city's candidature and the awards were much celebrated and publicized by the City Council.

operation implemented by the Porto City Council since 2014, is an example of the reproduction and dissemination of such narratives and representations. Using a generic graphic language, easily recognized internationally, the 'Porto.' brand projects a marketable version of the city, largely presented as its rightly, endemic identity (Rebelo et *al.*, 2022).

The pursuit of a more equitable and plural urban reality demands narratives and representations that challenge current paradigms and help envision alternatives. The hypothesis presented herein is that in contexts such as Porto, the aesthetics and implicit politics of informal dwelling can provide important contributions to the formulation of such alternative discourses and representations, thus helping counter a narrative of inevitability that underpins the hegemonic neoliberal vision of the city as a competitive product in a global market (Anholt, 2007).

The paper firstly provides a contextual definition of the research subject, through which we begin to unravel the subversive potential of informal dwelling practices and aesthetics (which lies in the very characteristics that determine their designation as informal) as well as to evince the aesthetic and legal intricacies of informality. We subsequently outline a theoretical framework for the defence of informal architecture as fertile ground for the identification of aesthetic and conceptual elements that can fuel counter-hegemonic discourses. Lastly, a case study provides preliminary empirical evidence that supports our hypothesis, through the observation and interpretation of informal architectural aesthetics from the city of Porto, and corresponding juxtaposition with the globalized visual rhetoric of the city's brand and graphic identity.

1.1 Informal dwelling: a working definition

The diversity of situations to which the concept of informality is applicable, within the context of architecture, requires a specific definition within the present research. Informality, as the word explicitly indicates, is defined in opposition to what is formal. The word 'formal' derives from the Latin word 'forma', meaning form, figure, and shape [5]. It also refers to "an agreed and often official or traditional way of doing things"[6]. In the case of architecture, the concept usually refers to the norms that regulate the practice of construction, but it also applies to the characteristics of the physical form of buildings. It is also significant that the Portuguese word *forma*

['fɔrmɐ], meaning shape, is a homograph of the word forma ['formɐ] which means mould - a matrix that produces identical forms. Thus, the same spelling indicates a material result and provides a metaphor for the normative system that produces it, evincing the interdependence between process and form, between practices and aesthetics.

The normative systems that regulate architectural construction and frame architectural aesthetics are set through explicit legislation and tacit conventions. Legal norms concern property rights regulations, local development plans, building norms, the last of which are ensured by the legal requirement of professional expertise. Tacit norms concern tradition, architectural styles, and dominant aesthetics commonly referred to as 'good taste'.

Taking the perspective of visual culture, our research primarily focuses on informal architectural aesthetics, those in which a 'mould' or matrix cannot be identified, and that consequently resists framing within the above tacit conventions. This means that we will not be examining architectures that have been produced, partially or entirely, through informal practices, if they reproduce normative aesthetics, as in the case of vernacular tradition. Nor will we address architectures that are visually unconventional if they were conceived within the exercise of professional architecture, for we are interested in the political significance of amateur architecture. We are interested in informal aesthetics, which derive from building processes that are partially or entirely informal, because such architectures, we argue, have political potential in both respects.

Therefore, although our case study focuses mainly on informal dwellings' transgression of tacit aesthetic conventions, we will address aspects of the transgression of building legislation as well, as they are enmeshed with aesthetic transgression and - because their analysis is concurrent with our objective of providing contributions towards the construction of alternatives to current hegemonic visions and representations of the city.

Besides the differentiation of the various natures of the norms that regulate formal practices and aesthetics, we should point out that architectures that present aspects of informality often also include formal processes. This hybridity has been noted by various authors (Alterman & Calor, 2020; Ateliermob, 2014), and its acknowledgement presents a more consequent approach to the study of these phenomena than classifying architectural objects into separate categories.

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There is indeed a spectrum of practices (Roy, 2005) and aesthetics in which we can identity degrees of formality and informality, ranging from dwellings that were illegally self-built on illegally occupied land, with reduced material availability, to luxury residences illegally built in protected areas[7], to illegal transformations of high-end buildings[8]. However, our research hypothesis does not concern these later examples.

Our focus on dwellings stems from "the emotional, personal and symbolic connotation of the house" (Rapoport, 1990, p. 22), and its relevance as a privileged space for the expression of personal identities that, self-building practices, contribute to the visual character of public places.

1.2 Previous contributions towards the legitimization of informal dwelling

Since the middle of the twentieth century, various authors have identified self-construction, or participated architecture, as a laboratory where experiments spontaneously take place, not only on construction solutions and aesthetic forms, but also in alternative relationships with economy, property, power, and the environment. Our hypothesis is supported by those works that address aspects that hint at the counter-hegemonic potential of informal construction practices. The most relevant examples are discussed below.

In the 1970s, in a different political atmosphere, John Turner was an outspoken advocate for "dweller control of the housing process" (Turner & Fichter, 1972, p. 2), a vindication that in his words "was treated as subversive nonsense" (Turner & Fichter, 1972, p. 150). Already then, he argued that housing must be conceived as an activity, rather than a commodity, and that "decision-making power must, of necessity, remain in the hands of the users themselves". (Turner & Fichter, 1972, p.154)

In Portugal, shortly after the 1974 revolution, a nation-wide decentralised project was launched to assist local communities living in precarious housing conditions, in the construction of dwellings and neighbourhoods that would take into account their concrete needs and desires (Bandeirinha, 2007). It was a short-lived project, as was the political atmosphere that enabled it. Still, the SAAL[9] experience and documentation are an international reference in participated architecture, which tried to establish a different housing paradigm, involving the reconfiguration of land property, as well as a revision of the roles of architects and dwellers in housing construction. Then as now, housing was a critical issue.

The work of Amos Rapoport (1990) on the meaning of built environment is also relevant to our investigation. His approach of the built environment as a system that enables and encourages particular ways of living underlines the critical importance of built environment design in the maintenance of social order. His argument for the importance of dweller meaning in housing architecture, as distinct from designer meaning, informs his critique of what he considers to be overdesigned environments, which he sees as a product of the modernist paradigm:" in fact, the whole modern movement in architecture can be seen as an attack on users' meaning" (Rapoport, 1990, p. 22).

More recently, the work of Ananya Roy highlights the political stakes of informality in the Global South, while remarking that urbanism policies that work with informality can also be useful wherever planning is "concerned with distributive justice" (Roy, 2005, p. 147). Her analysis demonstrates how urban informality brings up issues of inequality and exploitation and evinces the injustice of the capitalist paradigm: "dealing with informality requires recognizing the 'right to the city'— claims and appropriations that do not fit neatly into the ownership model of property." (Roy, 2005, p. 148)

Most of the field research on informal dwelling addresses the context of the Global South, rarely addressing its presence in Western European contexts. The reason for this, other than the obvious fact that informal construction practices have become rare in such regions, may also include a visibility issue. The formal construction paradigm, asserted by the modernist project, has become so prevailing in these contexts, as to be perceived as natural, invisibilizing other practices. Although much of the built environment in Western European cities is considered vernacular and as such fulfils criteria that would classify it as informal, self-construction is perceived as a practice pertaining to the past, as it is hardly ever envisioned as a contemporary practice in hegemonic projects for the future of cities.

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7. See for example: https://www.jn.pt/justica/justica-pede-demolicao-de-seis-moradias-ilegais-no-geres-e-acusa-18-pessoas-13498035.html

8. For a highly mediatic Portuguese example, see: https://ionline.sapo.pt/artigo/736712/polemica-marquise-de-ronaldo-pode-violar-direitos-de-autor?seccao=Portugal_i

9. Serviço de apoio ambulatório local.

Still, examples can be found that explore different types of informal construction practices and expressions, produced in Western contexts, within different social dynamics. Once again, we highlight examples which take on a political stance. Recontextualizing the work of Collin Ward, Richard Bower has revisited the history of 'plotlander' housing in the UK in face of the contemporary housing crisis, suggesting the "positive potential of informal and alternative housing models in the UK and wider Westernized world" (Bower, 2017, p. 79). António Coxito (2016) has examined the role of contemporary vernacular architecture in the context of activism and alternative communities, to ascertain the possibilities of autonomy and autarchy in architecture, framing it within research on architecture as an instrument of utopia.

These few studies and experiments stem from the disciplinary fields of architecture and urbanism. Our research project examines the subject from the perspective of visual culture studies, aiming to contribute to the constitution of a body of research, visual material, and conceptual elements from which citizens can draw in order to imagine and formulate alternative futures. Although we approach our subject from a visual perspective, we work on the premise that aesthetic and political aspects of our subject are intimately linked.

2. Case study

Our argument is framed within an understanding of public space as a discursive scene. Brand placement and architecture are two important means of intervening in the public scene and constitute the focus of our case study. We contrast the ubiquitous and imposing presence of the 'Porto.' brand in the streets of Porto, with the widespread yet disregarded presence of informal dwelling aesthetics, in order to evince the latter's subversive potential. Considering public space as a scene where hegemonic projects work to establish cultural dominance (Mouffe, 2007), and built environments as expressions and representations of cultural, social, and political systems, we examine the respective roles of the 'Porto.' brand as a dominant representation of the city, and informal dwelling aesthetics as a counter-hegemonic visuality.

2.1 The aesthetics of 'Porto.'

Designed to represent the city as well the City Council, the 'Porto.' brand simultaneously promotes both, targeting tourism as well as the local population (Rebelo et *al*., 2022). Since its inception, in 2014, the City Council uses a wide diversity of means to grant the 'Porto.' brand massive visibility in public space, as well as online. It labels public buildings, municipal vehicles, and street workers uniforms, signals building sites, and is widely used in billboard communication. The scale of some of these interventions is gigantic: for example, the wrapping of buildings in the process of rehabilitation (Figure 8.1.1). Large three-dimensional logos placed in touristic locations to serve as selfie backgrounds. The brand's intended ubiquity, the variety of scales and its placement, both imponent and pervasive (Figure 1), its sudden and spectacular appearance, denote a strategy to invest the city with a dominant discourse and a constructed identity, an instance of what Sola Morales (2002) referred to as abusive identities imposing overwhelming homogeneity to citizens.

▸ Figure 8.1.1 - Building wrap | Figure 1b - 'Porto.' logo labeling a municipal vehicle
▸ Source: the authors

Although the brand was internationally awarded, it also faced criticism from local designers (Laranjo, 2016; Moura, 2014) as well as citizens and organized groups who contest the development model it represents, and the brand's legitimacy to represent the city (Melo & Balonas, 2019). Its graphic language has been at the centre of discussions on originality, plagiarism, and design trends that have placed it anywhere between a trend-leading brand and a product of global homogenization (Moura, 2015; Ribeiro & Providência, 2015; Rodrigues, 2019). Its formula is widespread internationally and has been adapted by other Portuguese municipalities on different occasions[10]: elements deemed characteristic of a given place are selected and represented through icons, using a generic graphic language (Figure 8.1.2).

Two main concepts are central and repeatedly used in the brand's promotional discourse: tradition, namely evoking heritage and connected to the concept of authenticity; and the opposite notion of "cosmopolitan modernity" (Aires, Moreira and Santos, 2017, unpaged). If we analyse this through the hegemonic logic of capitalism - which underlies discourses that equate the city's identity to a brand - we see that the city is conceived as a product, whose main assets are the aforementioned concepts. The brand's design highlights these two assets, through the representation of traditional local elements using a global contemporary graphic language that, as noted by Moura (2015), is characteristic of our historic period rather than a particular place.

The smooth and clean aesthetic of this graphic language is not specific to place branding. According to Chul-Han (2018, n/p): "The smooth is the signature of the present time". The "aesthetics of the smooth", enables accelerated communication. It does not "ask to be interpreted, to be deciphered or to be reflected upon" (Chul-Han, 2018, n/p). The advantages of such aesthetics in the context of branding that targets external consumers are evident: it produces representations of places that translate their alterity into easily recognizable global references, suitable for rapid touristic consumption (Porto Pelo Porto). It provides what could be called a *fast-otherness* - emptied of potentially challenging alterity - that can be absorbed during a weekend break.

▸ Figure 8.1.2 - 'Porto.' graphic identity
▸ Source:© Eduardo Aires/White Studio

The massive presence of hegemonic visual languages in public space is a means of asserting the domination of cultural, social, and political systems. In the present case study, the capitalist vision of the city as a product is manifest and endlessly repeated in public space, namely through the placement of a city brand. It is also manifest in the city's architecture, either in the 'smoothed' rehabilitation of heritage buildings, in the

'cosmopolitan modernity' of international iconic buildings[11], or the stingy aesthetics of generic apartment blocks, in which a profit-driven logic seems to leave no space for superfluous aesthetic concerns.

The pervasiveness of the language and symbols of capitalism is deep-seated in the urban landscape, having become so familiar as to seem natural. The existence of alternative expressions in public space is therefore crucial if other visions of the city are to resist the seeming inevitability of the current social order and different futures are to be envisioned. In face of the hegemony of global capitalist aesthetics, the visual character of informal dwelling can provide an antidote or a counter-image of the city, that in the words of Solá-Morales (2002), may provide a critique of the prevailing city model, as well as a possible alternative.

2.2 Informal architectural aesthetics as countervisuality

What we are designating as informal architectural aesthetics does not fit in the 'Porto.' product package. Informal dwellings are not considered as heritage, because, unlike vernacular tradition, their visual expression does not correspond to recognizable tacit norms, nor do they look modern or embody hegemonic conceptions of innovation. They would not be considered cosmopolitan or international, according to the prevailing imaginary, although they do present, in different forms, aspects of internationalism in the diverse origins and global accessibility of some of the materials employed, in their visual references, and even the people who inhabit these dwellings, as they are often the only possibility for low income or undocumented immigrant populations (Matos & Rodrigues, 2009)

Informal aesthetics cannot, by definition, be framed within known categories. The expression 'informal' serves as an uncategorized folder that accommodates a diversity of expressions that cannot be fitted in defined categories. This makes them intriguing and somewhat ungraspable, and as such, difficult to integrate in the regular tourist experience, whose brevity demands more immediate satisfaction.

Nevertheless, when adequately 'smoothed', some types of informal aesthetics that in the past were disregarded by the market, have become viable products: such is the case of Porto's endemic urban typology known as 'ilhas', many of which have been the object of functional and aesthetic reconfigurations in order to integrate the local accommodation market (Coutinho, 2017). This has been causing speculative pression over Porto's 'ilhas', and its inhabitants[12]. It is also true that there is a touristic market (even if essentially a niche market), for the type of rough and often disconcerting architectural aesthetics produced by informal processes, namely among a public that is suspicious of the products of globalization.[13] Such cases suggest the possibility of co-optation processes by which capitalism absorbs potentially subversive expressions, rendering them innocuous and turning them into yet another commodity (Alvelos, 2003).

Informal aesthetics are anything but smooth or clean. If, as Chul-Han (2018) proposes, smoothness is associated with perfection, the aesthetics we are looking at revel in imperfection. Surfaces often display the harshness of raw materials, presenting variable textures and colours, forms are irregular because of the employed tools, mirroring the singularity of the gestures that produced them (Figure 8.2.3). This complexity resists conceptual grasp but is generous to our senses. Resonating with Pallasma's comparison between the medieval "city of sensory engagement" and the modern "city of sensory deprivation" (Pallasmaa, 2012, p. 43), we see the expressiveness of informal aesthetics, in stark contrast with the aseptic smoothness of global graphic trends, and the mute aesthetics of generic apartment blocks.

11. See for example the visual and discursive presentation of the new business, cultural and civic centre *Matadouro*, by Kengo Kuma: http://ooda.eu/work/matadouro/

12. See for example: https://expresso.pt/sociedade/2018-01-24-Moradores-da-Ilha-da-Tapada-no-Porto-recusam-ser-deportados-para-dar-lugar-a-turistas

13. On this subject see: https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2019/jan/28/no-one-likes-being-a-tourist-the-rise-of-the-anti-tour

▸ Figure 8.1.3 - Irregular wall | Figure 3b - Informal dwellings | Figure 3c - Informal dwelling detail
▸ Source: the authors

As we were able to document, although the presence of informal aesthetics is widespread and can be detected in a wide range of locations in the city of Porto, it may not be evident to the untrained eye. Unlike branding tags or spectacular architectural icons, informal architecture is embedded in the urban fabric, for they are the result of quotidian, long-term, non-centralised processes. Their visual character emanates from the landscape as a collective – even if dissonant - expression. Indeed, through the personalization of dwellings' exteriors that often occurs in informal construction (Figure 8.1.3 and 8.1.4), personal identities reach public space. Therefore, the resulting aesthetics can legitimately be regarded as a representation of that collective.
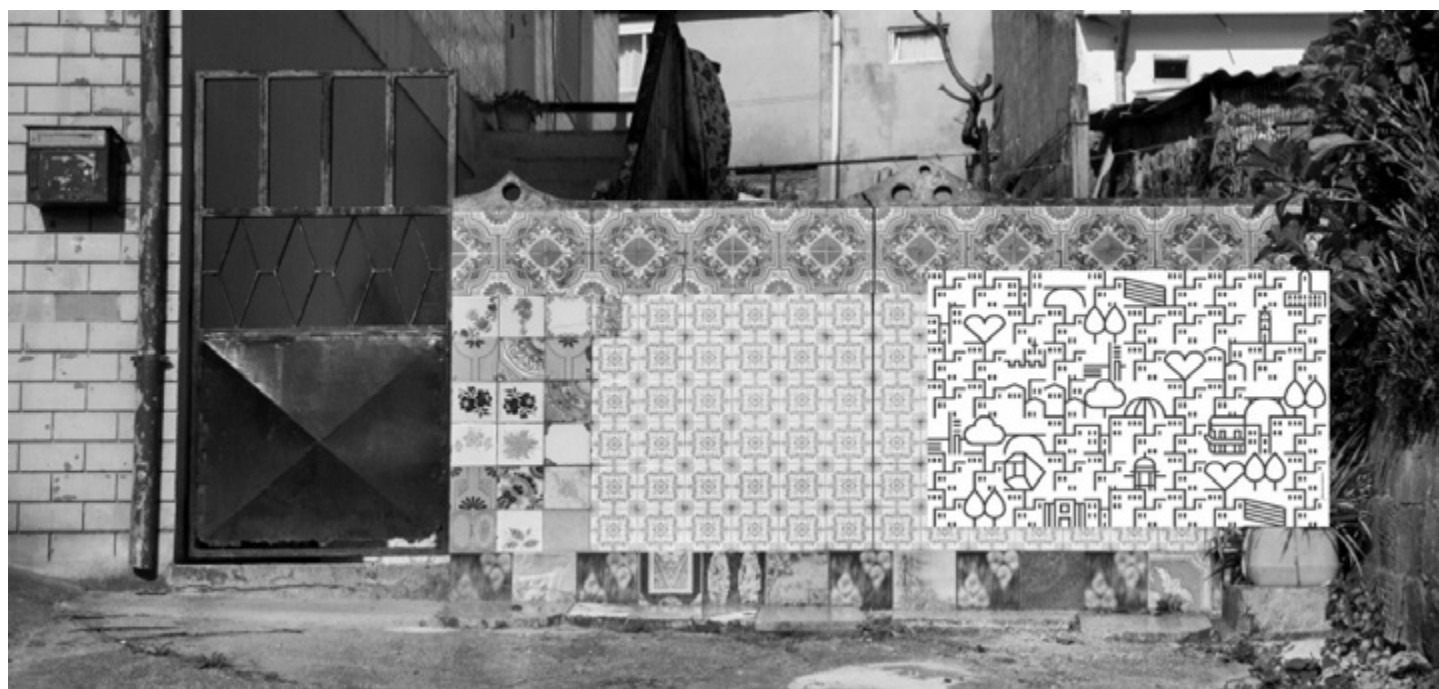
▸ Figure 8.1.4 - Framed gate | Figure 4b - Exterior house decoration | Figure 8.2.5 - Decorative elements on façade
▸ Source: the authors

It is worth noting that much of what is now valued as the city's-built heritage was produced before formal construction processes have become prevalent in the domain of housing. Although tradition was then very dominant, the fact that citizens directly intervened in the construction of their environment produced a diversity that constitutes the visual character of Porto's heritage landscape (Icomos, 1996), widely disseminated as the city's visual identity. The contemporary concentration of building activity in the few hands of professionals, developers, and affluent citizens, increasingly makes for an urban landscape that is the product and representation of dominant social groups.

The issue of citizen participation in the construction of built environments is a point of confluence in our study, where tacit aesthetic norms intersect construction regulations. Legal norms – as well as social and economic hierarchies – inhibit the participation of a large majority of the population in the construction of built environments, consequently impeding their contribution to the visual character of places, and their representation in public space. To a certain extent, the legal norms that render the building activity an exclusively professional domain also ensure control over urban environment aesthetics. In that sense, self-

building is often the expression of aesthetics deemed illegitimate. By intervening in the creation of urban landscape aesthetics, dwellers not only subvert the accepted role distribution paradigm, they also seize the opportunity to produce countervisualities (Mirzoeff, 2011) (Figure 8.1.5).

▸ Figure 8.1.5 - Detail from 'Porto' graphic identity over photograph of tiled wall
▸ Source: the authors

The aesthetic diversity produced by informal dwelling is a potent antidote to the homogenising effect of global design trends that attempt to represent cities, as to the pervading monotony and anonymity of contemporary generic architecture (Elsheshtawy, 2011). But perhaps its most valuable quality is being an expression of social diversity and democratic representation in urban landscapes. Keeping in mind that built environment aesthetics are powerful instruments in the assertion of political, social, and cultural systems, as well as persuasive enablers of corresponding lifestyles and relationship modes (Rapoport, 1990), aesthetic diversity means more than pleasure for the eyes: it contributes to the vital existence of alternative modes of building, dwelling and exercising citizenship in urban environments.

Concluding remarks

We have been able to identify concepts and aesthetic qualities that reinforce our hypothesis on the pertinence of looking into informal dwelling, for contributions to the construction of counter-hegemonic discourses and visualities in the city of Porto, and potentially in similar contexts.

The contextual definition of our research ecosystem enabled the identification and interrelation of concepts that contribute to the comprehension of the subversive potential of informal dwelling practices and aesthetics. A reflection on the relationship between the concepts of norm, form and mould, evinces the intrinsic connection between process and form, practices, and aesthetics, fostering the acknowledgment of the evocative potential and political meaning of informal dwelling aesthetics. These concepts also and provide a synthesis of that connection that can be employed in the formulation of counter-hegemonic discourses. The consideration of the explicit or tacit character of the normative systems that produce informality also contributes to disclosing the interconnections between legal and aesthetic conventions, namely in regard to their common political potential. This differentiation also informs the ascertainment of which, among the diversity of practices that can be designated as informal construction, may correspond to the research objectives.

A succinct literature review identified previous contributions to the legitimization of informal dwelling that foreground its political stakes, providing a theoretical foundation for our argument, and situates our research in geographic and disciplinary terms.

The case study offers a contextual analysis of the potential enunciated in the research hypothesis, by proposing to consider informal dwelling aesthetics as countervisuality, in the city of Porto. The city's graphic identity is examined as a dominant representation, that promotes a capitalist vision that currently dominates the city's development. The analysis of this identity enabled an identification of the visual strategies employed to establish the hegemony of that vision, namely the brand's pervasiveness in quotidian environments, through different scales of placement in public space; the use of a globalized design formula, and a generic graphic language to promote the city as a product, among prospective consumers; and the employment of the type of visual language that Byung Schul-Han' has designated as "aesthetic of the smooth" in order to facilitate the flow of uncritical consumption.

The identification of such aesthetic strategies and characteristics enables their confrontation with informal dwelling aesthetics, as a means to ascertain its potential as countervisuality. Thus, a set of aesthetic qualities was identified as potentially subversive: non-conformity to the promotional representation of the city (namely its association with tradition, innovation, and cosmopolitanism); unclassifiable aesthetics unfit for fast touristic consumption; complex and perceptually challenging aesthetics; its emanant rather that imposed character; and aesthetic diversity as a representation of social diversity and the product of participation. However, we just as much signal the risk of co-optation of such aesthetics by hegemonic discourses.

Further investigation is needed to fully ascertain the counter-hegemonic potential of informal dwelling and experimentation is required in order to determine the effectiveness of an employment of concepts and aesthetics emerging from informal contexts, in the formulation of counter-hegemonic discourses and representations. The present paper endorses the pertinence of such research.

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