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Urban Dualities: Mobility, Segregation, and Resilience Through Ethnographic Design

Abstract

Human life is a navigation between dualities, such as formal and informal, or movement and stasis. In this essay, I focus on the ethnographic work Owners of the Map: Motorcycle Taxi Drivers, Mobility, and Politics in Bangkok and an interview with the author, Claudio Sopranzetti. His work examines informal mobility infrastructure, as he mentions, "Buses, taxis, cars, tuk-tuks, Skytrain, subway, canal boats, river boats, vans, bikes, motorbikes, motorcycle taxis—all of these possibilities present themselves to denizens on the move, according to location and income" (Sopranzetti, 2017, p. 3). This piece focuses on moto taxis and how these systems contribute to the segregation and spatial organization of cities. It also shows the social and economic changes that arise from these tensions over time.

Furthermore, urbanization, particularly in the context of globalization, has transformed cities into complex and often volatile spaces. As cities become increasingly crowded with marginalized citizens and noncitizens who challenge their exclusion, the nature of citizenship itself is often contested. As Holston (2017) explains, "If cities have historically been the locus of citizenship's development, global urbanization creates especially volatile conditions, as cities become crowded with marginalized citizens and noncitizens who contest their exclusions. In these contexts, citizenship is unsettled and unsettling" (p. 3). One significant change society may experience is how marginalized communities navigate and resist urban systems through infrastructure, reshaping their environments. I recognize parallels between informal mobility infrastructure, as seen in Bangkok, and formal, static infrastructure, as in São Paulo—where fortified neighborhoods contribute to urban segregation in response to violence and insecurity. To explore this, I draw on Teresa P. R. Caldeira's City of Walls: Crime, Segregation, and Citizenship in São Paulo.

In examining the role of mobility infrastructure, taxis, and fortified residences in shaping urban experiences, I found personal connections to both informal and formal, mobile and static

systems. From the dynamics of using "bochos verdes" (green beetle taxis) to living in a fortified neighborhood called Satelite and an apartment in Interlomas, both in Mexico State, I have witnessed how informal, yet highly organized systems operate outside direct state control, reshape how different groups resist, and transform urban environments.

Building on this, I am particularly interested in tools for resistance, transformation, and resilience. This resonates with Sopranzetti's words about "how commodities, people, rumors, aspirations, and power circulate through its veins" (Sopranzetti, 2017, p. 3). With this understanding of the city, I introduced the concept of Care Infrastructures in a paper for my Proseminar in the Master of Design Studies (Publics) program at the Harvard Graduate School of Design with Toni Griffin. Using La Casa de las Muñecas, a trans woman collective, as a key example, I explore how different communities and collectives create 'care infrastructures' that, despite being outside state control, support and transform communities.

Finally, as a Mexican woman trained as an architect but not following a conventional practice, my career has led me to focus on three key areas: violence in Latin America, queer encounters, and community-based work. Through an ethnographic approach, I address design questions to inform and create strategies for connecting people and expanding opportunities for these communities. I conclude this essay with a reflection on the lessons learned from both ethnographies and my personal experience growing up in Mexico, considering their impact on urban experiences and community engagement.

Introduction

Mobility groups that create informal infrastructure and wield power within cities play a significant political role. These groups' demonstrations are highly performative and visible to the broader population, representing a global phenomenon observed across regions and continents. As a result, they profoundly shape urban mobility, power dynamics, and political structures. For example,

in Bangkok, Claudio Sopranzetti highlights the role of motorcycle taxi drivers in the political landscape, particularly their involvement with the Red Shirt protesters. These protesters, as mentioned in the book, demanded the dissolution of the government led by Abhisit Vejjajiva, new democratic elections, and an end to the political and economic inequalities and double standards they face every day (Sopranzetti, 2017, p. 1).

At the same time, privatized residential areas have emerged, often offering services beyond state control. These spaces reflect the social stratification analyzed by Teresa P. R. Caldeira, who examines how the privatization of public services creates exclusive enclaves for the wealthy, deepening the disconnect between social groups and exacerbating inequalities. In São Paulo, as Caldeira's ethnography reveals, these spaces highlight growing urban segregation. Similarly, in my experience living in Interlomas—a suburb of Mexico City—I observed how privatized spaces, while providing safety, contributed to reinforcing divisions between those who can access such services and those who cannot.

Thus, informal mobility in Bangkok and fortified residences in São Paulo illustrate distinct forms of segregation based on political, economic, and social dynamics—phenomena also evident in Mexico City. Despite these challenges, my city offers intriguing examples of grassroots responses to these inequalities. One particularly inspiring initiative is La Casa de las Muñecas, a collective supporting trans woman, which demonstrates how community-based efforts can address systemic gaps. Like Bangkok's motorcycle taxi networks, La Casa de las Muñecas fulfills essential needs such as shelter, healthcare, and transportation. These grassroots systems—what I term "care infrastructures" operate outside traditional frameworks, providing critical support to marginalized groups. Their adaptability, as described in Designing Disorder: Experiments and Disruptions in the City (Sennett and Sendra, 2020), allows them to dynamically meet community needs and catalyze social change.

Understanding the historical memory of these case studies and their impact on daily life provides a foundation for asking the right questions, essential for shaping design interventions. In this context, my interest in this type of research, particularly in this essay, is to identify and analyze these questions to propose key strategies for future design projects. These strategies, in turn, aim to engage Latin and queer communities through participatory processes that foster meaningful connections and drive positive social impact.

Navigation Between Dualities: Moto Taxis in Bangkok as Catalysts for Social Change

On October 10, 2025, I had the privilege of interviewing Claudio Sopranzetti via Zoom to discuss his book Owners of the Map: Motorcycle Taxi Drivers, Mobility, and Politics in Bangkok. The book examines the question, "How were conflicting conceptions of the city, formal and informal economies, as well as public and private spaces, sustained, adopted, or challenged by their different forms of mobility?" (Sopranzetti, 2017, p. 8). In addressing this question, the author explores the role of motorcycle taxi drivers in Bangkok's political landscape, particularly their relationship with the Red Shirt protesters.

One quote that stands out in the book is from a driver: "If you want to get out fast, motorcycle taxi drivers are your best choice. Everybody wants us on their side. We know how to move, how to get out. Nobody knows the city as well as us. We are the owners of the map" (Sopranzetti, 2017, p. 29). This statement reflects the central role these drivers play in shaping urban mobility and political dynamics.

Building on this, this analysis explores how conflicting conceptions of the city—formal and informal economies, and public and private spaces—are influenced by mobility. Through Sopranzetti's investigation of the political agency of motorcycle taxi drivers, particularly their involvement with the Red Shirt protesters, the author highlights the impact these drivers have on urban life. With that in mind, my key interests in this text are urban mobility and political agency, the

daily life of motorcycle taxi drivers, informal economies as forms of resistance, resilience and historical memory, digital platforms and the changing dynamics, collaborative governance, future movements, and how these movements shape the city.

Motorcycle Taxi Drivers, Urban Mobility, and Political Agency – These drivers use mobility not just as labor but as a form of political mobilization. Sopranzetti argues, “people could also take control of flows and reclaim their centrality by adopting mobility as a tool of political mobilization, not just as a form of labor or a locus of capitalist accumulation” (Sopranzetti, 2017, p. 12). He explains that while formalization of their sector may provide stability, it also risks displacing informal workers through economic pressures and the selling of newly acquired assets. However, in Thailand, formalization unintentionally fostered a greater sense of pride and solidarity among workers (Appendix 1).

The drivers' daily routines include interactions with various members of society, from passengers to street vendors, creating a rich network of social relations that sustain solidarity. Sopranzetti describes these interactions: “sporadic passengers, an occasional delivery of documents to faraway offices, a cigarette, some money won and lost at dominoes, and an endless search for distractions. It is during this apparently dead time that many of the drivers’ social relations are forged and sustained. As the life of the street unfolds in front of them, the drivers chat, joke, and interact with street vendors, office workers, and urban dwellers” (Sopranzetti, 2017, p. 19). This network of relationships and interactions helps informal workers maintain collective action.

Moreover, informal transportation workers are an essential part of the urban system and serve as a form of resistance to the forces that attempt to suppress informal labor markets. Sopranzetti’s book demonstrates that urban knowledge, as embodied by informal workers like Bangkok’s moto-taxi drivers, represents a crucial form of resistance. Drivers' legal negotiations with local governments over parking spaces set a precedent for other informal sectors, such as street vending or illegal gambling. Sopranzetti observes, “people could also take control of flows and reclaim their centrality

by adopting mobility as a tool of political mobilization, not just as a form of labor or a locus of capitalist accumulation" (Sopranzetti, 2017, p. 33).

Furthermore, resilience and historical memory are crucial in this context because, despite suppression by authoritarian structures, informal economies in Bangkok demonstrate resilience. Informal workers understand their role in a broader history of collective action, drawing strength from past achievements to continue their resistance. Sopranzetti argues that these workers "could also take control of flows and reclaim their centrality by adopting mobility as a tool of political mobilization" (Sopranzetti, 2017, p. 33). In light of this, urban interventions should acknowledge these historical struggles and ensure that current movements are grounded in this continuum of survival and resistance.

Although the theme of digital platforms and their impact on motorcycle taxi drivers is not addressed in the book, I believe it is important to include this perspective to situate the mobility and power of drivers today, particularly in how digital platforms, after the pandemic, have affected them. In my interview with Sopranzetti, we discussed how the rise of digital platforms like Uber and Grab has diluted the traditional roles of informal taxi drivers (Appendix 1).

The shift to app-based work during the COVID-19 pandemic brought in younger, university-educated workers, which reduced the collective strength of drivers. Sopranzetti noted that during the pandemic, "many informal drivers transitioned to app-based work, which diluted the traditional roles and skills that once empowered them" (Appendix 1). This example highlights that in cities like Milan, informal gathering spaces have emerged for gig workers, but such spaces are often not intentionally designed, representing missed opportunities to support these workers. A similar resilience is seen in Bangkok's street vendors, who create micro-communities through daily interactions.

Another important point to consider is gender. Sopranzetti's focus on male-led collectives raises questions about gender dynamics in activism. From my experience, it is particularly interesting

to note that, in contrast, many Mexican collectives are women-led, and their strategies and priorities often differ from those of male-led groups. Investigating these gendered approaches could uncover new strategies to strengthen urban social movements.

In this regard, informal mobility in Bangkok is an example of the power to shape the city through the challenge of urban space and power structures. Motorcycle taxi drivers and other informal workers challenge the traditional boundaries of urban space. Their actions, including political mobilization and negotiations with local governments, reshape how public and private spaces are used and contested. Additionally, the informal economy, particularly in transportation, represents a form of resistance to rigid formal structures, contributing to the diversification of how cities operate and who has control over their spaces. As informal workers carve out spaces for themselves within the city, they contest the dominance of formal, top-down governance systems.

On the other hand, shaping social and economic networks is crucial. The informal connections that form among moto-taxi drivers, street vendors, and other gig workers play a vital role in creating vibrant urban spaces. These networks offer support, solidarity, and a sense of belonging, fostering a strong identity within their communities. Sopranzetti notes that, when they are not working, and when they gather, "it is during this apparently dead time that many of the drivers' social relations are forged and sustained" (Sopranzetti, 2017, p. 19). This sense of community creates a collective urban identity that counters the anonymity of the modern city. Moreover, these informal networks also influence local economies. By negotiating with local governments for space, motorcycle taxi drivers and other informal workers assert their economic presence, securing vital resources and opportunities for survival in a rapidly urbanizing world.

In response, the rise of informal labor has pressured local governments to rethink their approach to urban governance. Sopranzetti emphasizes the role of "inclusive partnerships" between informal workers and local governments (Appendix 1). In places like Bangkok, motorcycle taxi collectives have successfully negotiated their position in the city through collaborations with local

authorities, altering traditional governance strategies. As informal workers gain political agency, they challenge urban governance systems to be more inclusive, responsive, and adaptive to the needs of marginalized groups.

Ultimately, Sopranzetti's work shows the importance of informal economies, particularly motorcycle taxi drivers, in shaping political landscapes, urban mobility, and collective resistance in Bangkok. The discussion also raises broader questions about the intersection of formalization, collective power, gender, and the role of digital platforms in the gig economy. In the future, urban movements may benefit from collaborative governance models and a deeper exploration of gender dynamics in activism. The shaping of the city by these movements highlights how informal workers and their resistance contribute to the ongoing transformation of urban space and power dynamics.

My main takeaway from this ethnography and my conversation with the author is the need for future urban movements to adopt collaborative governance models that involve civil society, governments, and private entities. Motorcycle taxi collectives in Bangkok have successfully negotiated such collaborations with local governments, demonstrating how inclusive partnerships can sustain operations. Sopranzetti believes that "inclusive partnerships could strengthen urban ecosystems by integrating formal and informal sectors" (Appendix 1). I believe that collaborative governance could integrate both formal and informal sectors into stronger urban ecosystems.

Segregation in São Paulo: Fortified Neighborhoods as a Form of Segregation

In City of Walls, Teresa Caldeira investigates the intersection of urban violence, fear, and social inequality: "In the last two decades, in cities as distinct as São Paulo, Los Angeles, Johannesburg, Buenos Aires, Budapest, Mexico City, and Miami, different social groups, especially from the upper classes, have used the fear of violence and crime to justify new techniques of exclusion and their withdrawal from traditional quarters of the cities" (Caldeira, 2000, p. 1). The author focuses on three main areas of São Paulo: Jardim das Camelias in the eastern district of São Miguel Paulista,

Mooca, a lower-middle-class neighborhood close to downtown, and upper-middle-class neighborhoods in the western part of the city, specifically Morumbi and Alto de Pinheiros.

Through this framework, Caldeira analyzes how discourses of crime reshape the city's physical and social landscape in these areas: "The new pattern of urban segregation based on the creation of fortified enclaves represents the complementary side of the privatization of security and transformation of notions of the public in contemporary cities" (Caldeira, 2000, p. 3). She explains that through everyday narratives, people make sense of their environment, but these stories, laden with fear and prejudice, often reinforce social divisions and justify exclusion. These dynamics contribute to a reactive response to insecurity that manifests in spatial segregation and the privatization of urban life.

In addition, crime narratives are not neutral. The author explains that they simplify complex realities by dividing the world into binaries—"The universe of crime—including the talk of crime and fear, and also the increase in violence, the failure of the institutions of order (especially the police and the justice system), the privatization of security and justice, and the continuous walling and segregation of cities—reveals in a compelling way the disjunctive character of Brazilian democracy" (Caldeira, 2000, p. 51). In her analysis, I see how such narratives are shaped by broader economic and social crises, particularly the economic downturns of the 1980s and 1990s. In São Paulo, the arrival of poor migrants became a focal point of these stories, with migrants often scapegoated for rising crime and urban decline. These prejudices create cultural and spatial segregation, pushing marginalized groups into peripheral areas while wealthier residents retreat into fortified residences.

Furthermore, the proliferation of walls, gated communities, and private security reflects a city increasingly fragmented by fear. As Caldeira (2000) explains, "When the environment is considered too dangerous, the best response becomes building barriers everywhere and intensifying all types of private control. People intensify their prejudices, and for that, the talk of crime is instrumental. But they also hire private guards, build walls, adopt electronic surveillance measures, and support

vigilante groups and private and illegal acts of police vengeance" (p. 91). In these spaces, the wealthy attempt to insulate themselves from perceived threats, transforming public spaces into private domains. This withdrawal represents a form of movement, where the response to insecurity is not collective action but isolation and the construction of physical barriers. As a result, public spaces—vital for interaction and democratic engagement—are abandoned, eroding the potential for meaningful urban coexistence.

In a similar way, Robert Rotenberg notes in his text Metropolitanism and the Transformation of Urban Space in Nineteenth-Century Colonial Metropolitanism that the actions of wealthy residents in the nineteenth-century metropole to reshape the physical space of the city follow a two-pronged approach. First, they redevelop undervalued areas to increase the exchangeability and commodification of space. Then, they remake the representational qualities of the space to reflect their class values" (2001, p. 8).

This process of segregation, as discussed in Chapter 3 of Caldeira's ethnography The Increase in Violent Crime, is rooted in broader social and economic transformations. The author explains that the growing inequality and economic instability of the late 20th century heightened feelings of vulnerability across all social classes. While the working class bears the brunt of violent crime, the middle and upper classes are more concerned with property crimes such as burglary and kidnapping. These fears justify spatial divisions and the criminalization of poverty, reinforcing stereotypes about certain neighborhoods and their inhabitants. The association of crime with favelas and peripheral areas further stigmatizes their residents, perpetuating cycles of exclusion and marginalization.

Caldeira further emphasizes that "Studies of patterns of crime in modern societies have shown that the institutions of order (criminal law, police, courts, and prisons) 'can only restrain common crime if they reinforce underlying social forces that are moving in the same direction' (Gurr 1979:370)" (Caldeira, 2000, p. 138). Underlying these dynamics is the state's failure to address violence effectively. The militarization of police forces in São Paulo, coupled with systemic

corruption and extrajudicial practices, exacerbates violence rather than curbing it. Police actions disproportionately target poorer communities, reinforcing existing hierarchies and deepening mistrust in law enforcement. Despite the promise of democracy, police violence persists, supported by public opinion that often equates harsh measures with justice. The widespread acceptance of private security further delegitimizes the state's role, privatizing safety and deepening urban inequalities.

However, although violence and disrespect of rights by the police have a long history in Brazil, the abuses of the 1980s and especially 1990s in São Paulo are especially egregious, for two reasons: first, because of their elevated numbers and the incorporation of abuse almost as 'business as usual' into the everyday life of the city; and second, because they have continued during the consolidation of democratic rule, and as the respect for other rights of citizenship, especially political rights, has expanded" (Caldeira, 2000, p. 138). With this, the book situates these trends within the broader context of São Paulo's urban evolution. Historically, the city's spatial organization reflected class divides, but the rise of fortified enclaves has entrenched these separations. Unlike the center-periphery model of earlier decades, these enclaves allow geographic proximity but maintain strict social and physical barriers. Their appeal lies not only in security but also in status, as they symbolize exclusivity and distinction. Advertising plays a critical role in promoting these developments, portraying them as refugees from urban chaos.

Nevertheless, the reliance on private security and isolated spaces undermines the principles of modern urbanism, which emphasize openness, accessibility, and interaction. "For the people interested in living exclusively among their peers, the walls have to be high indeed, and the rich residences do not conceal their electric fences, video cameras, and private guards" (Caldeira, 2000, p. 138). This transformation of São Paulo's public sphere reflects a broader disjunction between its political and spatial realities. While democratization has expanded political participation, urban life has become increasingly segregated, limiting opportunities for collective engagement and solidarity.

Despite these challenges, Caldeira acknowledges the potential for resistance. “In São Paulo, opposition to the segregationist and antidemocratic impulses of the built environment comes partly from the media but mainly from other sources: the democratization process, the proliferation of social movements, and the expansion of citizenship rights of the working classes and of various minorities” (Caldeira, 2000, p. 334). Social movements, human rights organizations, and marginalized communities continue to challenge the structures that perpetuate violence and segregation. Recognizing the historical memory of collective struggles and creating inclusive public spaces are essential steps toward reversing this movement.

Growing Up Amid Segregation, Violence, and Security Discourses in Mexico

Growing up, I identified as "Chilanga"—a term used to describe people from Mexico City—because of my accent, the food I ate, and the media I consumed. However, I always felt a sense of disconnection from the city’s daily culture. Unlike many city residents, I didn’t grow up walking from place to place; my family primarily relied on a car. This aligns with Caldeira’s observations about how fortified residences and segregation create a disconnection from active public spaces. Reflecting on this, I remember that while I played in communal gardens with my neighbors, the streets were off-limits due to constant warnings from adults about child kidnappings—crime narratives similar to those in São Paulo. The only active public space within walking distance that I recall was a market that operated only on weekends, which we casually called el mercadito. On Sundays, my family would visit for tacos campechanos made by el Güero, who had a crush on my mother, often resulting in free food. We also exercised at el Cerrito, a green area that later became a site for development and residential projects.

In this suburban context, I rarely experienced the lifestyle or streets typically associated with city living. My first independent outings were to a large mall called La Cúspide, a striking red building with open spaces and tent-like roofs. I found its design inviting because it offered views of the city and had private security, which made it feel safer. My friends and I would go there to watch movies

and stroll around afterward. Cultural activities, like visiting the Templo Mayor Museum or my favorite, the National Museum of Anthropology, felt more like small trips or vacations.

These excursions were often with my grandfather Miguel and sometimes included events like seeing The Phantom of the Opera at the Auditorio Nacional or attending intimate plays at La Teatrería in Roma Norte. Reaching these places required significant effort—at least 40 minutes by car without traffic or two hours by public transport—highlighting the disconnection from the city and community life. When my grandfather didn't drive us or lend my mother his car, we relied on public buses, often crossing Periférico—a major highway—to transfer from one to another, as there wasn't a subway nearby.

Occasionally, we used green or pink-and-white taxis, depending on the area. I especially loved the green bochos as a child; their drivers shared fascinating stories and expertly navigated shortcuts, though these rides were a luxury due to their cost. The collective experience in Mexico reminds me of the Moto Taxi Drivers in Bangkok. They are strong and share a deep discontent with the arrival of digital platforms, which have reduced their business. This has led to protests, like one in 2019, when I was stuck in my car for hours as they blocked the entire city and suburbs: "Miles de taxis generan caos en Ciudad de México en protesta contra Uber y otras aplicaciones" (Univision, 2019). According to the article, between 8,000 and 10,000 participants protested the "elimination of apps in the transportation sector unless they are incorporated into the Tax Administration Service within a fiscal taxation framework."

Throughout high school, I continued to experience the suburban lifestyle and informal transportation. I lived in Interlomas, a fortified environment where all neighborhoods had checkpoints regulating entry and exit. Some required simple ID checks, while others, particularly in luxury apartments, implemented measures like car inspections and detailed data collection. Service providers had separate entrances from residents and visitors, reflecting a sharp stratification. These practices align with Teresa Caldeira's observations in City of Walls, where she critiques the privatization of

security. By bypassing state control, wealthy communities create their own security systems, reinforcing fears of crime and aspirations for exclusivity.

Furthermore, Interlomas also housed a significant Jewish community, which welcomed me into its social circles. This community, in addition to private residential security, had its own volunteer security service exclusive to members. My friend Tamara Braveman explained to me that, "One of the Jewish security organizations, Bitajon, educates members from childhood about safety. This stems from the need to self-protect due to the historical complicity of state security in attacks against the community. Only members control who enters, ensuring no infiltrators."

Juxtaposed to this area are low-income neighborhoods like Palo Solo and Jesús del Monte, where many service providers live or run family businesses. This proximity starkly illustrates the urban dynamics Caldeira critiques. While the wealthy isolate themselves within fortified enclaves, the surrounding areas reflect the realities of inequality and segregation. This spatial divide perpetuates social stratification, making mobility between these worlds not only physical but deeply symbolic.

Care Infrastructures: Tools for Resistance, Transformation, and Resilience

Care infrastructures can be understood as systems that provide support to marginalized groups, often functioning outside traditional structures or state control. These initiatives are flexible, adaptive, and deeply rooted in community participation. For example, La Casa de las Muñecas in Mexico City, a collective supporting trans woman, exemplifies such a system. These collective created shelters that address essential needs, including healthcare and transportation, while empowering individuals through social networks that foster integration and resilience. As discussed in Designing Disorder: Experiments and Disruptions in the City (Sennett and Sendra, 2020), these infrastructures operate as open systems that encourage collaboration and shared responsibility.

In addition, drawing on Iris Marion Young's framework of oppression, care infrastructures address the gaps left by formal systems and offer models that cities could replicate across different

socio-political contexts. Marginalized publics—feminist groups, advocates for abortion rights, victims of femicide, and trans collectives—fight for access to public commons like healthcare, security, and equitable wages. A pressing example is the ongoing issue of femicides in Mexico, with 901 recorded this year (Pérez, 2023), which underscores the urgent need for secure and supportive spaces. Moreover, compounding these challenges are systemic inequities in pay and employment: women earn 15.6% less than men, and 68% of employed women earn less than $300 USD per month. Trans women face additional layers of marginalization, with Mexico ranking second globally in trans murders between 2022 and 2023 (Transrespect vs. Transphobia, 2023).

In this context, La Casa de las Muñecas exemplifies a care infrastructure that addresses these systemic gaps. Founded by Kenya Cytlaly Cuevas Fuentes and her team, this trans feminist organization operates three shelters and partners with 35 related institutions. Its services include health, social, cultural, and administrative support. The shelters, established through collaborations with state entities, provide safe havens for trans women facing violence, displacement, and marginalization.

Furthermore, the first shelter, Casa Hogar Paola Buenrostro in Mexico City, began operations in February 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic. It provides housing for both national and migrant trans women. The second, Casa Hogar Catherine Danielle Márquez in Cuernavaca, opened in February 2022 in partnership with the Morelos state government. The third, Casa Hogar Kaory Catarero Regalado in Apaxco, serves migrant trans women and opened in February 2023. These shelters represent a successful model of collaboration between the state and civil society, challenging stereotypes and addressing the systemic exclusion of transgender women.

Importantly, community involvement and volunteer engagement are critical to the success of these projects. In La Casa de las Muñecas, volunteers assist with tutoring, workshops, and meal preparation, while community dining rooms serve as hubs for interaction and support, catering to elders, children, and residents of the shelters. The shelters also offer education, skill-building

workshops, and legal resources, empowering participants to reclaim agency and build resilience. Additionally, their comprehensive approach includes programs for environmental conservation and green space management, further integrating the shelters into their neighborhoods.

This initiative not only transforms individual lives but also influences broader societal perceptions and policies. The enactment of the Paola Buenrostro Law, which acknowledges trans femicide in Mexico City, demonstrates the legal impact of this initiative. By fostering self-governance, collaboration, and community action, La Casa de las Muñecas helps to shift cultural narratives and create lasting systemic change.

Conclusion: Designing Strategies with an Ethnographic Approach

Motorcycle taxi drivers in Bangkok illustrate how informal mobility can act as both resistance and political mobilization. These drivers challenge urban power structures and contribute to the political landscape, as seen in their involvement in protests and resistance to the formalization of their sector. A key factor behind their power lies in their physical gathering spaces, or meeting places, where a sense of community is fostered. As Sopranzetti explained in an interview, “What made the moto taxi drivers so organized was their specific stations where they would wait, fostering collective engagement. With the rise of digital platforms, drivers no longer need to gather in specific spaces—they can wait anywhere, be it at home, in a bar, or elsewhere. However, informal waiting areas continue to emerge in cities” (Appendix 1). The advent of digital platforms has eroded these physical spaces, underscoring the importance of maintaining areas for collective interaction and solidarity.

Furthermore, street protests, despite their seemingly chaotic nature, often exhibit surprising order. This order is driven by a deep sense of desperation and extreme necessity, as individuals and groups take to the streets to demand change or highlight critical issues. Historical references often form the foundation of these protests, drawing on past struggles and the lessons they impart. In this context, symbols play a pivotal role, acting as powerful stories that communicate shared experiences,

values, and call for justice. These symbols not only unite individuals around a common cause but also transform the protest into a narrative of resistance and hope.

In addition, the distinction between formal and informal structures raises critical questions about power and control. Who decides what is formal or informal? Ultimately, those with the authority to enforce these distinctions hold the power. Informal settlements, often seen as chaotic or unstructured, possess significant organization, shaped by unintentional agreements and collective practices that evolve over time. These systems emerge outside institutional control, driven by necessity and the survival instincts of communities. While formal structures are governed by political and institutional powers, informal systems represent an alternative form of governance that operates outside these confines. This tension often mirrors broader issues, such as moral panic, which fuels fears around immigration and economic pressures.

For example, Teresa Caldeira's research on urban segregation and privileged spaces in São Paulo highlights how the privatization of security and the creation of fortified neighborhoods contribute to growing inequalities. Driven by narratives of fear and crime, these actions divide the city into exclusive spaces for the wealthy, further segregating social groups. They also diminish the use of public spaces, weakening community engagement and urban life, which exacerbates segregation and disconnection. The process of informalization is often criminalized, with immigrants often seen as prime examples of this phenomenon. Yet, it is essential to consider who is behind these decisions, as the power to “informalize” or legalize is deeply political. Negotiating the line between formal and informal systems is a process of resistance and survival, challenging the authority structures that seek to define them. In this context, it is crucial to recognize and respect other formalities, especially those that arise from communities outside institutional frameworks. These alternative forms offer valuable insights into social aesthetics and present effective tools of power, challenging conventional understandings of order and legitimacy.

Moreover, I introduce the concept of "care infrastructures," which are systems outside state control that support marginalized communities. La Casa de las Muñecas, a collective supporting trans woman in Mexico, exemplifies how such infrastructures provide critical resources—like housing, healthcare, and social support—that foster resilience and community transformation. These infrastructures not only reactivate the public realm but also aim to dismantle barriers between social groups, creating stronger community identities and support. Given that this case study takes place in Mexico City, it raises questions about how we might create or revitalize a sense of community in suburban or fortified neighborhoods. How can we shift the narrative of fear and foster collaboration among residents?

A potential answer lies in the intersection of gender and activism. Queer collectives in Mexico employ unique strategies for resistance and social change, shaped by their experiences and the specific challenges they face. These collectives often prioritize solidarity, mutual support, and community building, offering alternative models of leadership and engagement. Additionally, history and memory play an essential role in these movements. Collective memory shapes the narratives of resistance and resilience, honoring past struggles while providing a framework for transforming the present and envisioning a more inclusive future.

By connecting these discussions to personal experiences of growing up in Mexico City, broader themes of mobility, segregation, and security come into focus. My own experiences navigating suburban spaces and informal transportation echo the urban dynamics discussed. The central takeaway is the importance of recognizing the political agency of informal workers and the potential of care infrastructures and collective action in resisting segregation and inequality in cities. This essay also underscores the need for inclusive urban governance, collaboration with collectives to amplify their impact, and the preservation of historical memory in shaping resilient, transformative communities.

Moreover, media plays a pivotal role in shaping narratives of violence and fear, as well as in the propaganda surrounding fortified residences. As Holston (2017) notes, “The periphery signifies a drama of extraordinary change, its themes of inequality, segregation, poverty, and denigration are intensely personal and political... Residents interpret changes in their neighborhoods as installments in a narrative of transformation.” Media influences aspirations, narratives, and desires, making it a key aspect of design. The story we tell through design shapes these perceptions.

To understand the informal and fluid aspects of urbanism, ethnographic studies or participatory methods are essential. Researchers must document how people use space in ways not captured by formal planning. Involving communities directly in the research and planning process reveals temporal patterns and invisible practices. Adopting an ethnographic approach to urban strategy is crucial for collaborative governance in the city’s evolving dynamics. The intersection of migrant arrivals and segregation highlights the urgent need for accessible public spaces that promote interaction and democratic engagement. However, the abandonment of these spaces, combined with the rise of fortified residences, undermines meaningful urban coexistence. To ensure inclusive and sustainable urban development, revitalizing public spaces and creating environments that foster community connections is essential.

As a designer, I often aim to organize, simplify, and create functional spaces or objects. Yet, the city itself is messy, chaotic, and unpredictable. Despite this, design is deeply intertwined with the lives of its inhabitants, and I recognize my responsibility to understand this complexity. I must embrace the messiness of the city, acknowledging that it is shaped by the unique histories, cultures, and experiences of its residents. My approach should go beyond functionality, seeking to add true value to people’s lives by creating spaces and objects that resonate with their essence. There is a critical need for connectivity spaces, especially for minorities, where they can feel included and empowered.

Sources

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Appendix 1 Interview with Claudio Sopranzetti

Q: In your view, did the government's attempt to formalize moto taxi drivers help or hinder their political agency? How do you think formalization affects other informal worker groups, particularly in terms of their ability to organize and resist?

A: The link to South America is very central. The idea of formalizing was very much implemented as part of the same wave seen in Latin America, especially in Chile and Peru, where informal markets were given property rights to make them formal, with access to credit, etc., which was a precursor to microcredit. One main problem with this approach is that if you give these titles to people who are cash-poor, the first thing they may do is sell them. In an urban context, if you give these titles to poor people, they will sell them to wealthier individuals and end up being pushed out. In Thailand, we saw a similar phenomenon with a secondary formalized market. It didn't work well in the short run.

What's more interesting is what happens when you put this formalization into motion. Since the early 2000s, we've seen unintended consequences, like a growing sense of pride and connection among

these workers. I observed something similar when I worked in Venezuela during the land distribution process under Chávez. For me, what's interesting is the relationship between state intervention and the growth of this collective agency.

Q: Based on your research, are there parallels between the political mobilization of moto taxi drivers in Thailand and other marginalized groups around the world, such as those involved in informal sectors like gambling or prostitution?

A: Yes, I think there are parallels. While the specific history of Thailand is unique, there's a global trend regarding workers involved in logistics and circulation, and the critical role they play in contemporary social movements. You could argue, as many scholars have, that logistics and circulation are central to the operation of contemporary capitalism, making them more vulnerable. For example, in Italy, I worked with logistics workers who realized that strikes within the company weren't as effective as blocking trucks transporting goods into the city. Suddenly, their protest became highly visible.

There's a noticeable emergence of transportation and logistics workers as a powerful collective force. In the U.S., for instance, we saw air traffic control workers' protests block the entire country's air traffic. The challenge for these workers is that, while they have the potential to wield significant power, there's also a strong sense of entrepreneurial individualism within the informal economy. Many workers see themselves as their own bosses, which complicates efforts to organize collective action. This mentality of individualism, I think, makes collective organizing difficult, especially with the rise of digital platforms like Grab or Uber, which exacerbate the atomization of workers.

Q: How have these digital platforms, such as Grab or Uber, affected collective organizing?

A: Since the book was written, everything has drastically changed. These platforms, which started entering Thailand around 2018-2019, were initially outlawed by the government. They existed informally but were not officially legal. However, when COVID hit, and physical taxi services were

restricted, many drivers had no choice but to turn to the apps, mainly for food delivery. The contrast between app-based drivers and traditional drivers has dissolved, and now everyone is on the apps.

What also happened is that local apps, particularly in Southeast Asia, became more dominant because they understood how to navigate state regulations better than global companies like Uber. The social composition of the drivers has also shifted, with many younger, university-educated individuals now working alongside the older drivers. However, the key point is that the skillset that once gave these drivers power—knowing the city's intricate routes—has diminished with GPS-based apps.

Q: How could urban interventions help foster these collective dynamics in an era of digitalization?

A: That's a question we explored with urban planners and architects during my research. What made the moto taxi drivers so organized was that they had specific stations where they would wait, which fostered collective engagement. With the advent of digital platforms, drivers no longer need to gather in specific spaces; they can wait anywhere—at home, in a bar, or wherever they want. However, informal waiting areas are still emerging in cities.

One potential intervention is designing spaces that allow workers to gather and spend time together. For instance, in Milan, I saw over 200 Deliveroo riders waiting for orders outside the train station. Cities aren't designing these kinds of informal spaces, but they should be. Offering workers spaces for interaction could foster collective organization, even in an atomized urban environment.

Street vendors are another example. While they don't formally own the pavement they occupy, many return to the same spot every day, building informal communities with other vendors. Over time, this creates a collective sense of mutual support. So, a key question for urban designers is: How do you build collective spaces in an increasingly atomized urban landscape?

Q: What lessons can future movements learn from your research?

A: One important lesson is the need to transmit knowledge and tactics across generations. In Thailand, the military and government have actively tried to erase the memory of past movements. Since the military returned to power in 2014, there has been a strong effort to control memory, prevent people from gathering in symbolic spaces, and suppress historical remembrance.

In terms of urban interventions, it's crucial to think about how to memorialize these histories within the urban environment. Rather than focusing solely on immediate tools or tactics, movements need to understand their place in a longer history of mobilization. This helps avoid the feeling of defeat when short-term goals aren't met. If you look at the broader historical impact of movements, you realize they have significantly changed lifestyles and survival strategies in cities. The effort to erase this collective memory is strong, so finding ways to preserve it in the built environment is essential.