

Summary in English

This thesis is a study of the relationship between uncertainty, informality, urban planning and housing access. Based on case studies in Buenos Aires, Argentina, it identifies and analyses different dimensions of uncertainty in informal settlements and shantytowns. The analysis concerns their impact on shelter access and affordability for marginalised communities, as well as the implications for the top-down and bottom-up planning practices in these areas.

The theoretical grounding of the thesis is based on a literature review outlining a disconnect between theory and practice and an insufficient conceptualisation of uncertainties in informal urban settings. Per definition, urban planning is meant to act upon the future and guide development through formal laws and regulations that are supposed to reduce uncertainty and informality. A contemporary reality of scarcities, unfolding crises, uncertainties, as well as ever increasing social, economic, environmental and political inequality impedes such planning activity. Uncertainty and informal development are more than just challenges to planning; they are also produced by the act of planning itself. In uncertain conditions, marginalised communities who cannot afford or are otherwise excluded from the formal housing market, access shelter through informal and often illegal strategies. This thesis explores these phenomena and supports an emerging paradigm in planning and housing provision that embraces uncertainty and informality.

Buenos Aires was selected as a place of study because of the unique combination of recurring economic crises and the normalisation of informal housing and employment as a strategy to deal with such problems. In this study, a distinction between centrally located shantytowns and suburban or peripheral informal settlements is made. The empirical research was conducted at two scales: at the metropolitan region and in individual settlements. Three areas were selected as case settlements: shantytown Villa 31, informal settlement Costa Esperanza and a contested land occupation in Guernica.

This study was guided by three research questions: first, How is uncertainty experienced in informal settlements and shantytowns in Buenos Aires?; second, How do different uncertainties impact the planning and development of these settlements?; and third, How can the practice of urban planning respond more effectively to conditions of high uncertainty and informality?

Urban ethnography was applied as a general methodological approach. Due to the unexpected outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, on-site fieldwork was supplemented with data collected remotely from Norway. The main research methods included: face-to-face and online interviews, focus groups, site visits and transect walks, photography and analysis of satellite images, secondary documents and literature. The analytical approach was inspired by and adapted from thematic analysis and process tracing. This was executed through generating narratives for each case study area and performing several rounds of coding before and after the case narratives were drafted.

The thesis is structured into 12 chapters. The first four chapters lay out the theoretical and analytical grounding, methodological considerations, as well as the context of the study. This is followed by five narrative case chapters, where the first two outline the development of shantytowns and informal settlements at the metropolitan scale, and the other three concern each of the case settlements. The final chapters of the thesis bring the cases together by

identifying the types of uncertainties that impact the case settlements, and by discussing the meaning of these uncertainties for the practice of planning in informal settings in Argentina more widely.

The findings support the idea that, as the practice of urban planning is meant to respond to uncertainties and formalise informalities, it often does the opposite: magnifying the existing and creating new uncertainties and informalities. In short, informal practices develop when planners have little to no control over the planning process, lack sufficient resources or disagree over goals and means of planning. In this study, uncertainties related to insecure tenure, economic instability and political decision-making appear to be experienced as more challenging to communities than health, safety and environmental risks and crises. Even the Covid-19 pandemic and the climate change have not made a meaningful difference to this order of priorities.

Since tenure uncertainty was identified as the most urgent risk or problem, the way in which it has been changing across time in the different settlements, was the primary focus of the empirical analysis. It is shown how the bottom-up planning initiatives led by local community leaders and activists are often motivated by the fact that engagement with or imitation of formal planning regulations and codes usually increase the perceived tenure security for residents in these settlements. If and when security from eviction is achieved, however, or when households who occupy these lands do not aspire to stay in these areas in the long-term, planning efforts might be ignored or even rejected. In such situations they may refocus their priorities on livelihood strategies and savings. The thesis also documents the role of community leaders as political actors and de facto planners, who attempt to address tenure and economic insecurity in their areas of influence.

The author argues that architects, planners and policymakers can learn from informal planning processes. The organising capacities and contingent reactions, which the communities mobilise against uncertainty and crises are often underestimated or not sufficiently communicated to planning practitioners. Planning cannot be an antidote for uncertainty and informality if it does not engage with these phenomena in a manner that is meaningful to communities. As for the implications of the study for urban theory in the Global South, this thesis rejects the notion that uncertainty is a state of nature causing urban informality. Instead, researchers and practitioners should be encouraged to investigate the contextual experiences of uncertainty and how they impact the quality of life for local communities. Participation and community empowerment should be central in such planning efforts.

The final part of the thesis is a list of policy recommendations for the different levels of government in Argentina and Buenos Aires. Concrete ideas and measures are proposed to enable state agencies, academic institutions and urban planning practitioners to better recognize and address the most pressing uncertainties and informalities. This is done conscious of the contextual differences between urban areas, thus rejecting the idea of the universality of planning solutions and importing best practices from the Global North or other faraway places, which have often done more harm than good.