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Book Review: The Spatial Logic of Informal Urbanism: Inventraset Assemblages

Kim Dovey and Redento B. Recio, *The Spatial Logic of Informal Urbanism: Inventraset Assemblages*, Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024; 150pp.; ISBN: 978-981-97-8119-5, £34.99 (hbk); ISBN: 978-981-97-8120-1, £27.99 (eBook)

Reviewed by: Hesam Kamalipour, Cardiff University, UK

In *The Spatial Logic of Informal Urbanism: Inventraset Assemblages*, Dovey and Recio (2024a) challenge prevailing narratives that portray informal urbanism in the Global South as chaotic and dysfunctional. The book argues that informal urbanism incorporates a distinct *spatial logic*, revealing how street vending, transport, and settlement are dynamically interrelated in sustaining both livelihoods and urban life. Building upon their previous works (Dovey et al., 2022; Dovey and Recio, 2024b), the authors develop the concept of *inventraset*, demonstrating that informal urbanism is not separate from the formal city but is dynamically related to it. Dovey has previously conceptualised informal urbanism as a “complex adaptive assemblage” (Dovey, 2012) and referred to informal settlement as “a mode of production” (Dovey, 2019). In this book, Dovey and Recio (2024a: 2) put forward *inventraset* as “a new concept for understanding and articulating informal vending, transport and settlement as a dynamic assemblage”. Through informed

explorations of Manila and Jakarta, the book offers extensive visual material, including urban photography and mapping, to illustrate the interrelations between urban informalities and formalities. It provides a nuanced perspective on how informal urban practices work in relation to one another as well as to what is considered the formal city.

While a growing body of research has explored urban informality, its spatial dimensions and the interrelations between different forms of informal urbanism have remained relatively underexplored. Emerging studies have shed light on the spatiality of specific informal practices, such as street vending (e.g., Dovey et al., 2022; Peimani and Kamalipour, 2022), and have increasingly recognised the importance of exploring the intersections and relationships between different forms of informality (e.g., Dovey and Recio, 2024b; Kamalipour, 2022). *The Spatial Logic of Informal Urbanism: Inventraset Assemblages* by Dovey and Recio makes a significant contribution by addressing this gap, exploring interrelated urban processes, and conceptualising *inventraset* to articulate the dynamic relationships between informal settlement, street vending, and transport. The book adopts assemblage thinking, rejecting reductionist perspectives and advocating for a relational approach that captures the nuanced interactions between urban informalities and formalities. It moves beyond rigid dichotomies of formal and informal urbanism, illustrating their interdependence, fluidity, and dynamic adaptations over time.

The book is structured into five chapters, each developing its core argument that forms of informality and formality are interrelated, and that informal urbanism should not be perceived as disorderly or peripheral but rather as integral to how cities in the Global South work. The first chapter introduces the concept of *inventraset*, illustrating how

informal street vending, transport, and settlement are interrelated. Rather than framing informality in opposition to formality, the discussion highlights how these processes adapt, transgress, and embed themselves within the urban fabric. The second chapter offers a visual and analytical journey through multiple cities across the Global South, using a mix of photographs and vignettes. This chapter shows how informal vending, transport, and settlement take place in relation to one another and to the formal city. The third chapter focuses on detailed case studies from Manila and Jakarta. Through urban mapping, spatial ethnography, and visual analysis at the scale of walkable districts, the chapter reveals how informal activities are tolerated in some areas while being tightly controlled or concealed in others. The fourth chapter explores a university campus in Metro Manila, where approximately 70,000 informal settlers reside, occupying about a fifth of the campus land. The authors argue that informal settlement, transport, and vending within the campus are integral both to the livelihoods of the residents and to the university itself. The final chapter synthesises the book's key insights, offering a broader theoretical and practical reconsideration of informal urbanism. By framing *inventraset* as a flexible assemblage, the discussion moves beyond simple dichotomies, exploring interrelations through multiple intersecting lenses, namely *markets and capital*, *spatial governance*, *urban morphology*, and *image and visibility*. Rather than reducing informal urbanism to a singular critique, the chapter critically reflects on how its spatial logic is embedded within these aspects, shaping cities in ways that cannot be fully captured by any one perspective.

One of the book's key strengths lies in its sophisticated theoretical and conceptual grounding, its extensive empirical and visual materials, and its insightful delineation of the

interrelations between urban informalities and formalities. The book also critically reflects on the political economy of informal urbanism and sheds light on the dynamics of governance and spatial regulation in relation to urban informalities, the significant role of urban morphology, and the ways in which informal urbanism is represented in mass media and public imagination.

There are areas where further development could enhance the book's analytical coverage and reach. The study predominantly focuses on cases from Southeast Asia; a broader comparative approach, incorporating case studies from other parts of the Global South, could provide a more comprehensive global exploration. The book's assemblage-based and relational approach, while theoretically rich, may present accessibility challenges for practitioners, policymakers, and non-specialist readers. A more accessible synthesis of key concepts and their practical implications could help bridge the gap between theoretical engagement and applied urban policy. While the book thoughtfully acknowledges ethical considerations regarding the photographic documentation of informal urbanism, there may be further opportunities to reflect on the question of consent and how local communities perceive their representation, which could further enrich the book's methodological reflexivity. The concluding chapter of the book briefly hints at the potential lessons the Global North could learn from the Global South; Future research could expand on how informal practices might inform alternative urban strategies in highly regulated cities, fostering an important cross-regional dialogue.

One of the distinctive features of the book is its explicit focus on spatiality. For readers primarily interested in the social, cultural, political, and/or economic aspects of

urban informality, this focus may seem to be a limitation. The authors provide a justification for their engagement with spatiality, suggesting that “a focused spatial critique can provide insights that other approaches cannot” (Dovey and Recio, 2024a: 7). The same critique could be directed at studies that focus solely on social, cultural, political, and/or economic dimensions. For those seeking a deeper understanding of the spatiality of informal urbanism and the complex relationships between different forms of urban informality, this book provides invaluable insights.

Overall, the book makes a significant and timely contribution to the study of informal urbanism. By adopting a relational, assemblage-based approach, it challenges conventional dichotomies of formality and informality, offering a sophisticated framework for understanding urban informalities as an integral and dynamic part of cities. While certain areas could be further developed — such as expanding the geographical scope, incorporating more practice- and policy-oriented discussions, and enhancing accessibility for non-academic audiences — the book offers a compelling and insightful framework for rethinking informal urbanism, serving as a valuable resource and a welcome addition to the relevant body of knowledge.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

I would like to acknowledge that I have previously collaborated with Professor Kim Dovey, including co-authoring publications.

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