Shifting Away from Binaries:
The Entanglement of Insurgent Urbanism,
Formal Participation and State Action

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Social protest by people living in poverty with inadequate services and limited access to urban opportunities is a regular feature of the political landscape of South Africa and other fast growing emerging economies in the south. Local people take to the streets to claim their rights to basic shelter and services and the protection of their environmental, social and economic spaces against neo-liberal policies. Images of people blocking roads and burning tyres reflect the failure of the state to provide for its people and create a polarized view of the state being pitted against the public. Citizens outside of the process, and the locality that is being represented, respond to these events in a myriad of ways. Some support the protests, while others question the process of civil resistance, wondering why citizens do not follow formal processes or attempt to address the problems themselves using systems created by the market.

This paper explores the radical approaches that are adopted by civil society outside of formal processes to ensure inclusive participation in decision making about urban futures. When marginalized or poor people participate in urban planning and feel they are not being heard, they move to create what are known as 'invented spaces' of participation, where they set the rules of the game of how, where and on what terms participation will occur. This includes staging protests in the streets of their neighbourhoods where they bring the state into their spaces, rather than moving to the formal spaces of government offices or meetings, where they believe their needs are not heard or addressed. This form of participation is known as insurgent urbanism as it challenges the mainstream approach of constructing and solving problems and establishing power. It is the response by the urban poor in defying policies and planning which are imposed upon them. It challenges the state, and the invited spaces of

participation that the state creates, by developing inventive, imaginative and often spontaneous forms of action and citizenship (Holston, 1998; Miraftab, 2006; Miraftab and Wills, 2005).

The problem with these strategies is that they themselves tend to order and categorise society into those on the inside and the outside, or those who are tasked to deliver and those who do not receive basic needs, and even those who are legitimate (civil society with their claims) and those who are not (the state who fails to deliver). This creates dualisms of 'us and them', formal and informal processes; the state and civil society; authentic and in-authentic claims, neo-liberal planning (formal political and civil rights and privatization) and protest; invited and uninvited spaces; and identity and agency (how people define themselves and are defined by others such as the state, other citizens and the media). These categories are necessary and useful as they help to explain how the state and citizens engage with each other over rights to the city and the opportunities it offers. However, they are problematic as they create a divided or polarized view of the world, which does not reveal the many relations and interactions that exist between the multiple actors that engage with each other in ways that are not polarized, but rather relational, as they struggle over the development of more equitable and sustainable cities. This staging of interactions is played out in the abstract spaces of legislation, policy and planning practices to the everyday lived worlds of the courts of justice and the streets of informal settlements.

An approach that considers the relations between these different spaces of citizenship and the actors that participate in them, including the state, may reveal a different interpretation that does not lead to polarization, exclusion, or one group of actors being viewed as more legitimate than another. The same holds true for the way in which

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'knowledges' about sub-standard housing and social movements are constructed. Expert scientific knowledge is positioned against, rather than in relation to, ethnographic or local knowledge creating a binary of knowledge and increasing the contestation for the 'truth'.

This short paper argues that dialectical relations need to be explored in understanding social movements and their relationship with the state in sub-standard housing provision in developing world cities. Planning theory and practice, and the construction of knowledge within planning, needs to take account of the power, resources and knowledge of the state, as well as the power, resources and knowledge of citizens, which emerge from multiple spaces of participation and the multiple relations that exist between them.

Holston's (2008) research on Brazil's informal settlements reveals how insurgent citizenship serves to both stabilize and de-stabilise state-citizen relations. This reveals the entanglement of different forms of citizenship and action, supporting the argument of this paper that the state and civil society, or different forms of citizenship are not dual or clear cut categories, but rather a set of entangled relations. An exploration of the multiple and shifting relations between different actors therefore needs to be undertaken if social movements are to be understood in spatial planning in fast growing cities. It is argued that there will be a fluidity in the relations between citizenship practices through the entanglement of formal and informal participation, the state and civil society, inclusion and resistance, and invited and invented spaces of participation. All of these relations are mutually constituted and hence need to be examined using a dialectical and relational approach.

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