Struggling, suffering, hoping, waiting:  
Perceptions of temporality in two informal neighbourhoods in Mexico

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Abstract

Human geography’s longstanding preoccupation with the intersection of time and space resonates with accounts of urban informal settlements which have indirectly highlighted change over time as a key characteristic; while recent postcolonial urban research explores the implications of multiple and dynamic temporalities for marginalised groups in cities of the global South. Drawing on these debates, this article applies an explicit focus on the temporal dimension of space in the context of urban informal settlements. Despite decades of research into the marginalised, self-built neighbourhoods which house many urban poor residents in global Southern cities, they continue to be portrayed in terms of a reductive and simplistic formal/informal dualism, meaning they are often treated as outside ‘normal’ urban considerations. Based on research in two informal settlements in Xalapa, Mexico, this paper explores residents’ perceptions of change over time in order to reveal the multiple temporalities that exist within the city and across these neighbourhoods, offering alternatives to dominant marginalising discourses through the construction of identity over time, and time-bound tactics of resistance. These narratives are contextualised by constraints, expressed in diverging or ambivalent accounts; but they suggest going beyond dualistic or nostalgic discourses to frame these neighbourhoods as places in the city.

Key words: time, space, urban informal settlements, postcolonial, Mexico
1) Introduction

Human geography’s longstanding preoccupation with the intersection of spatiality and temporality (Soja, 1980; Thrift, 1983) has inspired increasing interest in foregrounding the temporal dimension of space in relation to urban issues (e.g. McCann, 2003; Raco, Henderson et al., 2008; Castree, 2009; Middleton, 2009). In particular, theorists have sought to highlight the uneven production of space and time in the urban setting (Massey, 2005). In debates around informal urbanisation in the global South, the importance of time as a resource for dynamic change has long been noted (e.g. Turner, 1968), and recently demonstrated through longitudinal studies in this setting (e.g. Moser, 2009); while work by postcolonial urban researchers has shown how urban temporalities reveal the effects of liberalising cities on marginalised populations (Jeffrey, 2010) as well as the empowering potential of memory (Till, 2012) in cities of the global South. Building on these distinct themes – human geography’s explicit theorisation of time and space, the implicit preoccupation with time in debates on urban informality in the global South, and postcolonial urban theory – this article suggests that an explicit focus on the temporal dimension of space reveals urban residents’ resistance to marginalisation, through the construction of identity over time, and time-bound tactics of resistance.

An emphasis on the temporal dimension of space resonates strongly with an understanding of global Southern cities as characterised by simultaneous provisionality, fluidity and stability (Simone, 2004: 215). For urban residents, these characteristics may be experienced as uncertainty in the context of scarce resources; but they also offer space to develop tactics and strategies to cope with the city’s ‘constitutive unknowability’ (Hansen and Verkaaik 2009 in McFarlane, 2011: 374). The marginalised, self-built neighbourhoods which house urban poor residents in cities of the global South offer a clear example of resourceful strategies employed by those with limited housing options. In many cities, these neighbourhoods are the main source of new housing. However, such places continue to be portrayed in terms of a reductive and simplistic formal/informal dualism (Hernández and Kellett, 2010), meaning they are often treated as outside ‘normal’ urban considerations (Roy, 2005).

This dualistic perception frequently entails a normative view of informal sectors and areas as separate from, and inferior to, those of the formal city (Lombard, 2009). It can be detected in depictions of ‘slums’ characterised by ‘pollution, excrement, and decay’ (Davis, 2006: 19), which while well-meaning risk perpetuating a generally negative and over-simplified universal image of informal settlements, providing local authorities with justification for policies of neglect and demolition (Gilbert, 2007). For example, South Africa’s 2007 Slums Act used the UN’s ‘Cities Without Slums’ campaign to justify the removal and displacement of residents from informal settlements (Huchzermeyer, 2007). Often, such marginalising discourses have a temporal dimension: settlements are portrayed by local authorities as temporary and thus worthless or invisible, using language like ‘“clandestine”, “sub-normal”, or “spontaneous”’ (Everett, 2001: 458).

In response to these still pervasive framings, this paper explores perceptions of time in the context of urban informal settlements, showing how residents’ narratives of the temporal dimension of space offer resistance to such discursive constructions.
Focusing on *senses of time* rather than abstract time (Crang, 2007: 510), it suggests that recognising multiple temporalities within the city implies renewed recognition of marginalised places and populations (Till, 2012). This occurs in two ways. Firstly, paying attention to how past, present and future are perceived and linked together by residents reveals the construction of narratives of individual and collective identity as a thread through time (McLeod and Thomson, 2009). Time plays an integral role in informal settlement residents’ accounts of individual and collective efforts to construct their neighbourhoods, both physically and in terms of place identity. Exploring this dimension facilitates understanding these neighbourhoods as their residents see them: dynamic, forward-thinking, and most significantly, part of the city.

Secondly, residents’ perceptions of the temporal dimension of space in the context of urban informal settlements offer the possibility of resistance and solidarity in the context of specific constraints, through tactics based on situated knowledge and learning over time (McFarlane, 2011). Such tactics may not be overtly political or even visible, but rather involve barely perceptible strategies such as ‘quiet encroachment’ (Bayat, 2004), dependent on a slow pace of change over time, which nevertheless shapes urban space in the context of uneven power relations. Through exploring these two processes, the paper aims to respond to the lack of understanding of urban dwellers’ everyday lives in marginalised neighbourhoods, which continues to permeate urban responses to informality (Jirón, 2010), despite decades of research into these neighbourhoods by anthropologists and other urban theorists. While such research has referred indirectly to the temporal dimension of urban informality, it has lacked a theoretical account of the precise relation between time and space found in geographic debates, explored in the next section.

*Time and space in human geography*

Following the separation of time and space in social scientific thought (Bergson, [1913] 2001), the (re)introduction of a temporal dimension into human geography is attributed to Hagerstrand (1970), whose formulation of time-geography sought to link macro and micro level spatial analyses of human behaviour. Identifying broad spatial-temporal constraints on potential human activities offered the potential for universal analysis (Hagerstrand, 1970: 12-14), suggesting that ‘time-geography can specify the necessary (but not the sufficient) conditions for virtually all forms of interaction – social and otherwise – involving human beings’ (Pred, 1977: 209). Time-geography’s claims to universality were challenged by feminist geographers, who suggested that they were undermined by its exclusion of the private and domestic domain associated with feminine experience of space: thus ‘[t]ime-geography depends on a space associated with a particular masculinity, but claims that it is universal’ (Rose, 1993: 19). In response, it was suggested that the potential for multiplicity and different experiences of time in space be emphasised (e.g. Massey, 1991).

Postmodern geographers extend this argument, suggesting that rather than understanding time and space as conceptually and qualitatively different, ‘a dynamic sense of space-time’ allows for the simultaneous existence of different temporalities in space and the ‘reciprocal influence of time on space’ (Crang and Travlou, 2001: 168-175). If time and space are seen as pluriform, opaque and integral to urban narratives, places can be understood as always becoming, with complex and multiple...
temporalities underlying their dynamic progression. Postmodern conceptions of time-space have elements in common with Halbwachs’ ([1941] 1992) idea of collective memory, where urban space is the blank canvas on which time’s passing is inscribed. Collective memory is expressed in the physical fabric of the city, as ‘all memory is socially constructed around some concept of space’ (Hebbert, 2005: 584). Shared space such as streets are an expression of group identity, whether through architectural symbolism from above, or ‘the accumulation of memories from below, through the physical and associate traces left by interweaving patterns of everyday life’ (Hebbert, 2005: 586-92). However, whereas collective memory sees places as the expression of social memory, postmodern accounts see time and space as interacting dynamically.

Recently, postcolonial urban research has drawn on both sets of ideas, situating collective memory in the context of multiple and dynamic temporalities. Work by Till (2012), Jeffrey (2010) and Simone (2008) on cities characterised by marginalisation and inequality offers a means of understanding the effects of liberalising processes on marginalised populations, while also suggesting the possibility of alternative perspectives and resistance through a closer focus on time. This paper contributes to these debates by extending this temporal focus on marginality to urban informal settlements. Bringing geographic theorisations of time and space to bear on debates around urban informal settlements, through a focus on how residents perceive change over time in the context of the socio-spatial construction of urban informal settlements, reveals multiple temporalities offering potential alternatives to dominant marginalising discourses through identity formation and time-bound tactics. The next section shows how time and space have been indirectly framed in debates around urban informal settlements, in order to suggest foregrounding temporality in the manner of the work outlined above.

2) Time, change and urban informal settlements

Urban informal settlements are premised on the idea of change over time, but this issue has formed the backdrop to debates, rather than being a central concern. While it is often not explicitly theorised in such debates, change is facilitated by the very notion of informality:

“As the process of informality responds to changing pressures, structures are added, settlements densify or expand, occupants change, a rental market emerges, expands and may be reversed, leadership emerges and is challenged, and as struggles for formal recognition and servicing are fought, sections may be bulldozed, and others densify or gradually consolidate” (Huchzermeyer, 2008: 3).

Such processes of change are rarely linear or predictable, and may include changes in security of tenure, land values, and even the location of the settlement as the city expands outwards. This suggests seeing informal settlements as ‘complex and changing social processes that play themselves out in intricate spatial arrangements’ (Huchzermeyer, 2004: 47), rather than purely physical environments, deficient of basic infrastructure and services. Understanding change in urban informal settlements is thus a means of foregrounding the dynamic yet prosaic productive efforts of the residents, rather than evidence of their temporary and therefore worthless nature.
Paradoxically, such dynamic change contains notions of permanence, located in the residents’ home and place-making activities, discussed in later sections; in the ongoing dynamic between continuity and change, ‘change does not exclude permanence, and permanence does not exclude change’ (McLeod and Thomas, 2009: 9).

These debates build on Turner’s (1972) formulation of ‘housing as a verb’ in response to state policies addressing these neighbourhoods as problems to be eradicated. Turner’s (1972: 131) experience in the Peruvian barriadas suggested that ‘[c]ontrary to the generalizations made by the mass media and an uninformed middle-class these squatter settlements are no more slums than any building or development under construction’; rather, temporary shacks are the first stage in new settlements, which overturn linear, staged conceptions of development and planning. Implicitly incorporating change over time as an integral aspect of informal settlements, ‘housing as a verb’ offered a robust response to official discourses using their apparent temporary, unplanned nature as a justification for demolition and eviction, and has had enduring influence. Resistance to marginalisation may occur through the construction of identity over time, and time-bound tactics.

Time and identity

Recent longitudinal studies of urban informal settlements have placed greater direct emphasis on time: Moser’s (2009) thirty-year study in Guayaquil, Ecuador, explores the dynamic nature of urban poverty across time and place, relating to changes in urban dwellers’ perceptions, aspirations, and expectations, with similar approaches by Perlman (2010) and Kellett (2010). Such studies make a vital contribution in terms of identifying ‘the huge creativity, pride and resilience of poor communities, which contribute not only to their local economies but also to the social mobility of cities’ (Moser, 2009: xvii), exploring change over time through observation by the researcher. In this paper, the temporal dimension of space is accessed through residents’ perceptions of time and change, focusing on their narratives of the past, present and future of their neighbourhood.

Foregrounding temporality offers access to residents’ constructions of individual and collective identity, in terms of generating meaning through connecting past, present and future narratives of home and place. In this sense, identity relates to narrative thread: rather than ‘sameness in time’, it refers to ‘the capacity to generate meaning over time so as to hold past, present, and future together’ (Benhabib, 1999 in Varley, 2007: 7, italics added). The incremental building processes used in informal settlements, which often take place over the course of many years, result in houses that are containers of meaning and memory. Much more than just shelter, they express, through their layout, architecture and interior design, ideas about progress, identity and values (Kellett, 2002). The physical embodies the social and the cultural, and provides the setting for these aspects of identity. However, as Varley (2007: 7) suggests, the meaning of home is not fixed in time or space, but anchored through its constant re-appropriation in social practice. This can be seen in the way that informal settlement residents view home ‘more as something in process than as something static or fixed’, reflecting the incremental nature of housing in this context, and the fact that low-income houses are rarely regarded as finished (Varley, 2007: 8).
Thus narratives of time operate across scales: stories of individual or household change are entangled with the history of the neighbourhood, seen by residents as a place in flux, subject to change. In this way, personal is linked to collective identity: change over time at the household scale relates to residents’ personal histories of development, while at the neighbourhood level, it is an integral part of the collective narrative of the place. Residents look back, and doing so invoke a collective memory which is place-specific: their own story of the city. Collective memory may also be negative (Barbera 2009); even so, to look back is to enable looking forward, as memory helps understanding of the present in light of past experience, again functioning as ‘a thread through time’ (Wolff Reyes, 2001 in Barbera, 2009: 76), and a collective impetus for future action and empowerment.

It is the construction of a collective narrative of place identity, linking individual to neighbourhood concerns, that offers residents an alternative to discourses to discrimination, and thus can be understood as resistance. This resonates with postcolonial approaches to retheorising the city, making communities visible through focusing on everyday practices of remembering, memory and the past as the basis for alternative future imaginings (Till, 2012: 8). In the context of structural constraints such as poverty and inequality, residents’ capacity to construct narratives of the city based on meaning through time stakes a claim on the urban environment.

*Tactics of resistance*

This is not to suggest that marginalised residents’ activities are aimed at overturning or displacing existing power structures. The economic, social and spatial constraints which contribute to the development of urban informal settlements may also influence the form and pace of that development. Different projects of place-making coexist and sometimes come into conflict; and faced with powerful urban interests, residents’ constructive efforts may by necessity be subtle and imperceptible. Tactics and strategies develop as the result of situated learning over time in everyday urban environments (McFarlane 2011); they are time-bound in the sense that they depend on the notion of multiple temporalities.

Bayat (2004) suggests that everyday activities which do not constitute overt resistance may nevertheless represent claims made on urban space by the urban poor, through the ‘quiet encroachment of the ordinary’. This refers to ‘noncollective, but prolonged, direct action by individuals and families to acquire the basic necessities of life … in a quiet and unassuming, yet illegal, fashion’ (Bayat, 2004: 81). In this way, cumulative encroachment contains the potential to contest state prerogatives through its capacity to invent new space, the slow pace of encroachment underpinning its imperceptible nature. Similarly, waiting is employed as a tactic which is often strategic rather than passive. Appadurai’s (2001: 30) ‘politics of patience’ refers to the disjuncture between the ‘tyranny of emergency’ fostered by the funder-orientated temporal logic of development projects, and the lived reality of urban activism in Mumbai, involving slow learning and cumulative change. Inaction may be a forward-looking strategy, letting things unfold over time according to a locally situated (rather than externally imposed) timeframe.

In the city there are ‘multiple practices of futures-making that coexist in harmonious or disharmonious ways’ (Anderson and Adey, 2012: 1532); but in the context of
uneven power relations, certain discourses may dominate. Planning theory and practice has been characterised as ‘overwhelmingly concerned with permanence’ (Bishop and Williams, 2012: 3): planners’ and policy makers’ view of time as ‘a finite resource that needs to be stretched or apportioned’ (Gilchrist, 2012: 2) rests on instruments of planning and budgeting which seek to mitigate against uncertainty and shape the future itself (Green et al., 2012: 1642). This is not to suggest a dualistic opposition between ‘policy makers’ and ‘community’, but that paying attention to multiple temporalities may reveal how specific discourses of urban temporality dominate, and how residents operate under and resist these. Nor is it to romanticise waiting: practices such as queuing, related to territoriality and scarcity, reflect state structures in which urban residents are forced to participate (Corbridge et al., 2004). Such spatial-temporal patterns of behaviour thus often derive from highly constrained conditions; but they also suggest strategies for moving forward that are so subtle as to be imperceptible, at least to ‘official’ and development-focused approaches.

Building on the preceding debates from human geography, work on urban informality, and postcolonial urbanism, this article suggests that foregrounding temporality in the context of urban marginalisation can reveal resistance through specific practices of identity construction over time, and time-bound tactics of resistance. Exploring multiple temporalities as a means of reclaiming urban pasts and imagining alternative futures suggests the political potential of these discourses, focusing on everyday experiences to move beyond discourses of exception which informal settlements are often subject to; while the idea of multiple temporalities also highlights the possibility of ambivalence and contradiction within and across different understandings of place. These ideas are explored through an analysis of residents’ past and future narratives, following a brief contextualisation of the research setting and dominant narratives of change there.

3) Nostalgia in the ‘Athens of Veracruz’

The research setting of Xalapa, the state capital of Veracruz, has a population of around 600,000 inhabitants, of which about half live in neighbourhoods with informal origins, known as colonias populares. In Xalapa, changes to the city’s landscape over the last five decades – rapid and unplanned urbanisation, population increase, rising poverty, and increasing informalisation of the economy – have occurred alongside loss of the city’s built heritage, and a decline in the status and quality of cultural activities leading to a perceived identity crisis for the city. In some popular and official accounts in Xalapa, narratives of change suggest an explicit link between the city’s ‘newer’ residents – perceived to be living in peripheral, low-income colonias populares – and the erosion of the cultural identity of a city known locally as the ‘Athens of Veracruz’ (for its high concentration of artistic and cultural activities). Local news reports state that ‘Xalapa, the State Capital, could now be considered a city of invasions’, due to the informal settlements that in the last decade have ‘appeared from out of nowhere [and] have swelled the ranks of the Athens of Veracruz’ (Zavaleta, 2009); as a result, Xalapa is ‘suffering the ravages of growth without planning’ (Velázquez-Álvarez, 2007). Alongside perceived environmental effects such as damage to the surrounding ecosystem (Dredge, 1995; Benítez et al.,

1 This section draws on Lombard and Molina (2010). Thanks to Ahtziri Molina for drawing my attention to the idea of Xalapa as ‘nostalgic city’.
increased social exclusion leads to a ‘fragmented city’ ruled by inequality and marginalisation (Amante Haddad, 2009). This reflects enduring representations of informal neighbourhoods as dysfunctional urban development (Ward, 1999; AlSayyad, 2004). In local discourses about colonias populares in Xalapa, this idea was prominent, particularly relating to their perceived physical (and spatial) qualities: local officials characterised them as ‘anarchic’, an ‘unwanted responsibility’, or as ‘nothing places’ which were ‘light years’ way from achieving full service provision (Lombard, 2009: Chapter 6). In this way, nostalgia for a glorious past mingles with concern over rapid urbanisation beyond official linear conceptions of development, reinforcing marginalising discourses about informality.

The two neighbourhoods where research was carried out represent two different histories of informal settlement in this context. Typical of many colonias, Loma Bonita was founded on ejidal land. The colonia is a small, sparsely-populated settlement, established in 1998, which houses around 35 families. It is located on the northeastern outskirts of Xalapa, an hour by bus from the city centre. Remnants of its former agricultural use are still apparent, with coffee and banana plants in abundance, and it is legally still part of the Ejido Chiltoyac to which the land originally belonged. However, it is in the process of regularisation, and is registered with the Municipality of Xalapa. Land there is cheap because infrastructure is lacking. At the time of the research, the neighbourhood did not have access to electricity or sewerage, and the existing water system had been constructed by residents. Many families lived in overcrowded conditions, indicative of low levels of income.

The second case study neighbourhood, Colonia Moctezuma, is a relatively established settlement, unusual in that it was developed on land belonging to the State Government, meaning that most residents have legal tenure of their plots. However, land was acquired unserviced, and the neighbourhood developed through informal processes associated with colonias populares. Moctezuma is located in the southeast of Xalapa, about 30 minutes from the city centre by bus. It is a relatively large settlement, with a population of between 3,000 and 5,000 (according to different estimates), established around 16 years ago. At the time of the research, the neighbourhood had most basic services, including electricity, water, sewerage, and street paving, although some residents were still awaiting connection to the drainage network. Moctezuma is considered to be well-located: there are several higher education institutions nearby, and in the surrounding area a new commercial centre and government office buildings have been developed.

Exploring residents’ accounts of change over time in these two neighbourhoods reveals the multiple temporalities that exist within the city, among different informal settlement residents, as well as between these and dominant narratives. I interviewed residents of these two neighbourhoods, as well as other residents of the city including local government officials and civil society representatives. Qualitative and ethnographic techniques were used to discuss residents’ perceptions of change over time.

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2 Agricultural land owned collectively by farmers under Mexican law.
3 Over the course of seven months in 2006-07, 34 semi-structured interviews were carried out with a total of 42 respondents in Xalapa. Additionally, specialist interviews were carried out with 16 experts and academics from within and outside Xalapa. Methods including participant observation, solicited photography and documentary analysis were also employed.
time; ethnographic approaches offer a fruitful way of understanding memory and its political potential (Till, 2012: 7; see also Jeffrey, 2010). Time as a dimension of place was strongly present in residents’ narratives of their lives in the neighbourhood, relating to how they framed themselves in the urban context, expressed in terms of looking back to past changes, and forward to (imagined) future ones.

4) Looking back in colonias populares: struggling and suffering

The significance of talking about the past lies partly in its link with the present and future: remembering the past is both a form of orientation in the present, and ‘a dynamic resource in imagining different urban futures’ (Till, 2012: 13), suggesting that reclaiming histories is an empowering and determinative process. Memory can contribute to making sense of the present in light of past experience: recalling past collective endeavours and achievements suggests the capacity to build the future through a shared basis for action and empowerment, located in present necessities and responses to those. Even where accounts of the past are ambivalent, conflicting or painful, this can foster sentiments of courage in the face of adversity and resilience as a basis for seeking a better future (Barbera, 2009: 72). In this way, talking about change over time contributes to individual and collective identity formation: a coherent narrative situates these individuals in the specific history of the neighbourhood, within Xalapa’s broader urban history.

During research in Xalapa’s colonias populares, narratives of the past were used to orientate the narrator in the present, contributing to a wider understanding of how the place developed. Many respondents talked of having to struggle and of suffering to obtain their plot, house or services. This section reviews these two elements of looking back, and in doing so, explores the connection between collective and individual memory as a means of staking a claim on a particular place, a position from which to frame the future, and a means of resisting negative discursive constructions.

Struggling

The word luchar, meaning to struggle or fight, may relate to resistance in a very concrete sense: the efforts of a community to resist attempts to evict or displace them over the years in which they have been engaged in settlement processes. Hardoy and Satterthwaite (1989: 34) describe a squatter settlement in Brazil where residents were finally granted the right to stay on the land after years of uncertainty; one resident commented that ‘[N]o technician can appraise the value of my shanty. It is worth 26 years of struggle’, suggesting that longevity confers legitimacy on a community through legal or political struggle.

Struggle may also relate to the (historic) involvement of political organisations and social movements in the process of settlement: in Mexico, the term conveys an element of collective struggle relating to community leaders (luchadores sociales) and left-wing protest in general (la lucha social). In the context of colonias populares,

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4 This approach is similar to oral history, which explores ‘individuals’ memories of their past … as testimony to significant experiences of the personal and collective past’ (Garces, 1996 in Gaudichaud, 2009: 60). While it can give rise to issues of representation and objectivity, it can also assist in accessing collective memory of groups and societies (Gaudichaud, 2009).
This may relate to struggling or fighting for a particular community benefit, usually in the early stages of the colonia, when political organisations may assist settlers to secure land, housing and services. Although illegal subdivision is more common means of land acquisition than invasion, organised or spontaneous (Connolly 1982), historically in some regions of Mexico, social movements such as the Urban Popular Movement (MUP) and Tierra y Libertad encouraged residents to demand housing, land and services through invasions and community self-organisation (Moctezuma, 2001). While such movements were often fleeting, as local and national governments were adept at co-opting and sometimes repressing such movements (Gilbert and Ward, 1985), certain cities such as Mexico City, Chihuahua and Monterrey manifested higher levels of politically-organised land invasion than others (Varley, 1998). In Xalapa, local social movements played an important role in pressuring the authorities for land and housing during the 1980s, and such organisations still exist in some colonias. Although land invasions are less common, organisations may act as intermediaries between settlers and landowners at the acquisition stage, as well as negotiating with local authorities on residents’ behalf for services.

The idea of struggle was particularly prominent in Moctezuma, relating to its political origins. Moctezuma’s foundation in 1993, as part of the Xalapa Land Reserve created by the Veracruz State Government, was facilitated through local political organisations: plots for residential use were granted by the State Heritage Department to political groups involved in the urban social movement, such as MOPI5, UCISV-Ver6 and the Democratic Revolution Party, with allocations supposedly based on members’ housing need. The role of political organisations in land acquisition meant they set their own criteria for qualification, such as attendance at meetings, marches and other political activities. Rebeca, a long-term resident of Moctezuma, who also obtained her plot via UCISV-Ver, commented: ‘I got the plot in about a year I reckon, in meetings’; suggestive of the levels of time, effort and commitment required for land acquisition in this way. While the presence of organised groups may facilitate negotiations with the authorities, processes fostered by such organisations could also be understood as clientelistic, based on the manipulation of poverty and housing need for political gain (Gilbert, 1994; Ward, 1999). In a clientelistic relationship, organisations promote loyal association over time as a marker of affiliation and criteria for reward.

Land acquisition is the initial step in a long process of residents’ ‘struggle’ to obtain services and facilities, which becomes part of their retrospective narrative of achievement, relating to the neighbourhood today. Such narratives suggest collective effort over time in the face of the local authorities’ indifference or unwillingness. In Moctezuma, Sebastian told me:

‘That’s how we’ve fought to get [services], at the beginning for example ... we normally used those little wells that used to exist, springs, they don’t exist any more. ... So that’s how we achieved ... this colonia’s progress. And even today, I’m still fighting’.

5 The Workers’ Independent Movement, a political group involved in Xalapa’s urban social movement.
6 The Veracruz Tenants’ and Housing Petitioners’ Union, also involved in the urban social movement.
This response implies a strong link between past and present, and between individual and collective memory: ‘struggles’ which occur significantly in the early stages of settlement development become part of a foundational story on which residents draw to situate current achievements. However, that the respondent is ‘still fighting’ suggests that appearances can be deceptive: Moctezuma’s relative density and development lend it a consolidated appearance, along with the abundance of shops and services along the main street, Calle Xolotl. But even now, the residents’ years of struggle are not over: for example, not all houses are connected to the sewerage network, and until the neighbourhood enjoys full service coverage, higher levels of occupation are unlikely. The memory of struggle, which offers a collective narrative of identity to residents, may also suggest that the struggle is not finished: while eviction is unlikely, more efforts will be necessary to meet residents’ basic needs.

Suffering

While narratives of past struggle have a political inflection, narratives of suffering were used to reflect the unfavourable conditions residents had to endure prior to obtaining a place of their own (whether in expensive or poor quality rented accommodation or when they first arrived) and their individual achievements. As Varley (2008: 21, original italics) has put it, in the context of colonias populares:

“It is difficult to exaggerate the centrality of the notion of ‘sufriendo’ (suffering) or ‘batallando’ (struggling) to people’s accounts of what it means to build their houses; but the point of those accounts is generally that suffering is what the narrator went through in order to get to where they are now”.

Thus the idea of ‘suffering’ has strong links to the present, often presented as the reward for past sacrifices. In this sense, the notion resonates with the ‘Catholic narrative of suffering and redemption’ (Varley, 2008: 21), perhaps unsurprisingly in Mexico where around 95 per cent of the population are Catholic. Suffering over time lends legitimacy to residents’ claims, in de facto if not de jure terms: in an account of an informal settlement in Argentina where residents lacked services and suffered official harassment, one resident suggested, ‘We … had to suffer and that suffering, though the law says differently, is what gives us the right to be here’ (Hardoy and Satterthwaite, 1989: 13). However, it also contains a more passive conception of individual agency in the face of structural constraints, perhaps related to the clientelistic culture mentioned above, in which encroachment and waiting are viable strategies, discussed in later sections.

In Loma Bonita, residents spoke of suffering as part of the process of construction, relating to individualised narratives of residents’ personal sacrifices. Some residents had started with a temporary shelter of one room, often made of wood and zinc metal sheeting, as the basis for the rest of the house. How quickly residents are able to consolidate their dwellings depends on their economic and social situation, as well as their capacity for ‘sacrifice’. Isaac and his wife described how they had constructed their house in Loma Bonita:

‘We’ve being doing it bit by bit, there’s still loads to do. … It’s been three years. … [Not with any outside help.] just through making sacrifices’.
The implication is that attaining your own place is not easy or straightforward, and requires a great investment in terms of effort and time; and in the absence of capital, time and effort are a form of ‘sweat equity’ (Hall, 2002). The level of sacrifice required varies between individuals and households, and economic difference between residents may be reflected in diverse timeframes of settlement and construction; but the overriding impression is one of a link between past suffering and present (or future) reward, in terms of deserving effort. Time thus becomes a critical dimension, as it allows low-income residents to manage construction at their own pace, relatively free from the constraints of official regulations and budgets.

Residents’ quiet encroachment on space over time thus offers legitimacy; and may translate into a normative narrative of effort. For example, Pedro described how he got his house in Loma Bonita:

‘Well, you have to struggle to achieve things, because if you don’t struggle, you’ll never have anything … [You achieve things] working, working … you have to struggle [or] you’ll never manage anything’.

This sentiment implies an idea of deserving effort, suggesting that residents are ultimately responsible for (lack of) progress in a given neighbourhood. The underlying idea seems to be that ‘the poor have to contribute resources of time, effort and money in order to obtain services which the rest of society obtains without direct contribution’ (Devas, 1993: 95). The burden of time and effort may fall more heavily on some members of the community than others; in particular, gender may be a key determinant (e.g. Truelove, 2011).

On the other hand, the overall process is one that draws residents together in shared history. My research found that a narrative of suffering was often employed to give credit to those who had to put up with most: it was used to refer to those who settled first, when there were no services. For example, Olivia, talking about arriving at Moctezuma several years after the first residents had established their houses and obtained basic services, commented:

‘When I arrived things were OK, the colonia, was already OK … [But] people really suffered when there was no water. … When I arrived there was already electricity, water, the colonia had already moved forward a bit, I mean I didn’t suffer much’.

The idea of suffering suggests a shared history, or narrative, of place: suffering in unity contributed to a collective sense of integration, relating to the physical processes involved in making a location. However, the respondent’s differentiation between her situation and that of those who had suffered more suggests diverse experiences even within the same colonia.

In this way, narratives of the past and gradual processes of change over time, in which residents themselves are the main agents, provide a coherent link to the present and future, both in the neighbourhoods but also within the wider city. Such narratives contrast with and contest popular and official accounts of chaotic change from the ‘Athens of Veracruz’ to the ‘city of invasions’, suggesting a process of struggle and
suffering which are part of the huge investment on the part of residents, in order to realise their future ambitions of a place of their own in constrained conditions. Meaning and identity through time are thus forged by looking to the past as a basis for future aspirations: in looking back at these processes, residents are also looking forward, to the imagined outcomes of their struggles and sacrifices so far.

5) Looking forward in colonias populares: hoping and waiting

The future dimension of colonias populares is extremely important for residents. Most of the respondents in my research were acutely conscious of the need to maintain a view of their future prospects, which often justified their arrival in that particular place, and provided a continued justification for their choices and activities. By contrast, the priorities and aspirations of marginalised residents are often represented as determined solely by necessity. It has been argued that due to economic constraints, ‘choice, creativity and aesthetical values are beyond the possibilities of local people’ (Viviescas, 1989 in Hernandez, 2008). Similarly, Walker (2001: 28) suggests that colonia residents are unable to express their ‘true social identity’ through the medium of their living environment, based on the supposed ‘homogeneity’ of architectural styles in these neighbourhoods. In general, there remains a scarcity of research into the ‘capacity to aspire’ of low-income groups (Appadurai, 2004 in Green et al., 2012: 1653). However, residents have specific future desires and preferences relating to their neighbourhood, expressed in terms of their hopes and aspirations. This section explores how residents look forward, in terms of hoping, relating to collective and individual expectations for the neighbourhood; and waiting, as a strategy for dealing with obstacles.

Hoping

Hope, ‘the stuff of our dreams and desires’ (Zournazi, 2002: 12), has a spatial dimension which is strongly evident in the context of urban informal settlements. The possible and potential spatial changes contained in hope mean it ‘unsettles the spacing of the present’ (Anderson and Fenton, 2008: 78). In my research, residents frequently talked about the future relating to the neighbourhood’s hoped-for trajectory in terms of spatial change which would foster legal and other changes: for example, as the neighbourhood developed from ejidal land to ‘consolidated’ colonia popular. Residents of Moctezuma, discussing a proposed project for a health centre said that they were ‘hoping that in the same way that certain things have been achieved, it will all hopefully be’, whether in this administration or the subsequent one. Hope also relates to a more generalised sense of optimism, expressed by Olga, a resident of Moctezuma:

‘We have to start each day, and be optimistic that, that things have to get done and we’re doing them little by little, so that hope doesn’t die, as the song goes ... always going forwards’ [laughs].

This response emphasises faith in slow progress, which resonates with the idea of quiet encroachment – the subtle, almost imperceptible appropriation of urban space in the context of uneven power relations and marginalising discourses of ‘nothingness’ and ‘anarchic growth’.
My research found that *colonia* residents often perceive their neighbourhoods as offering opportunities for ownership, integration and social mobility. For example, Federico described how Moctezuma was initially considered

‘of a popular nature, [but] recently it’s changed a lot. It’s not considered lower-middle class … the economic status of the colonia has changed’.

This suggests an upwardly mobile population, as families consolidate their dwellings. Bruno explicitly linked the idea of progress to demographic changes which neighbourhoods experience as children grow up and move out of family homes:

‘Some colonias had too many people before. But now 20 years have passed and … now the [whole] family doesn’t live there. ... There are houses where only two people live – before, they were houses where 12 people lived. ... So spaces grow, there are fewer people left – so they start to organise better. Because really, to organise so many people without the resources, it’s difficult’.

As well as highlighting the ‘bottom-heavy’ demographic characteristics which often prevail in newer *colonias* (such as Loma Bonita), this also suggests a long-term trend that counteracts the overcrowding envisaged as characterising these places. It relates to patterns of densification and change that are as complicated as anywhere else in the city, as *colonias* experience life-cycle changes which impact on their social structure just as in other areas, suggesting that they are as ‘ordinary’ as anywhere else.

Linking collective and individual narratives, residents also expressed aspirations for the neighbourhood dependent on their own efforts and activities. For example, Olga described how she had encouraged reforestation in Moctezuma, in contrast with other residents’ more prosaic requests:

‘There are lots of people here who complain because there isn’t paving, but to me that seems a minor problem. ... The question of reforestation seems very important to me. I’m trying to do it here, in a small way, as much as one can, to have plants, trees, not very big ones, but to encourage people. ... I think that we have to fight a bit more for green streets where they’ve cut down our trees’.

While the living conditions in these places may be constrained by hardship, this does not preclude residents’ aspirations relating to aesthetic and environmental concerns. Olga’s response highlights the fact that *colonias populares* are social places made by humans – as much as (or even more so than) other neighbourhoods – which contain hope and conviviality, albeit in difficult conditions. These places express different and diverse aspirations, as Olga’s comments suggest; more broadly, focusing on residents’ future hopes reveals their capacity to aspire.

Indeed, many residents expressed optimistic views of the future. When asked directly about how they saw the future of their *colonias*, a variety of different respondents from both neighbourhoods gave positive answers:

‘Very prosperous this colonia ... Very nice’.
‘Full of progress ... We’ve already obtained the majority of services, a lot of progress, all that’s left is paving and construction in some lots, and maybe they’ll be sold, and more people will arrive’.

‘It’s advancing ... I think that with more people it will develop’.

These positive views are reflected in the obvious care and effort that residents invest in their homes and neighbourhood through urban improvements, such as communal gardens in Moctezuma, or housing improvements in Loma Bonita. Looking forward in this way underpins the dynamic characteristics of these places, of which residents take a long-term view. Such activities could also be seen as a form of care for the collective good (Anderson and Adey, 2012, 1532): individual future aspirations relating to the common spaces of the neighbourhood express a sense of responsibility, not just to place but in a relational sense, to those who inhabit that place (Massey, 2004).

Despite the positive views expressed by residents, a diversity of perspectives and positions exist within any neighbourhood, and some take a more nuanced view of future change over time. Federico, a resident of Moctezuma, suggested:

‘[The future] looks prominent, people’s mentality is changing ... I mean this mentality of being a simple settler is going to change, to being a person like a citizen. ... The colonia is growing, as are the businesses that have started up nearby, changing the physiognomy of the colonia. We think that if we carry on organising as we have been, we’ll soon have all services’.

This response suggests that the efforts made by residents to effect physical change ultimately result in social change, which influences their aspirations, for example relating to citizenship. This in turn affects the future prospects of the colonia, and thus a virtuous circle is fostered. In the constrained situation in which they find themselves, residents organise and do the best they can to achieve their present and future goals; but change is ultimately dependent on their sustained efforts. In some cases, dynamic change may not be a possibility, reflected in a more ambivalent narrative of waiting.

Waiting

Particular perceptions of temporality in urban informal settlements depend on the situation of the individual or household and neighbourhood. In constrained circumstances, residents may find their options limited. The pace of change in different neighbourhoods may vary depending on circumstances such as levels of income and leadership, with temporal narratives reflecting this. Urban residents who find themselves ‘in limbo’ express narratives of temporal anxiety (Jeffrey, 2010); and in particularly constrained circumstances, the ‘politics of patience’ may be the most viable strategy for marginalised urban populations (Appadurai, 2001), through waiting keeping sight of long-term goals.
An example from Loma Bonita, the poorer and newer of the two case study neighbourhoods, reveals how patience is used as a strategy by residents. In the neighbourhood kindergarten, toilets were fitted, but connected to a septic pit due to the neighbourhood’s lack of drainage. Alicia, who worked in the neighbourhood, told me that the pit was hazardous to children, because of its lack of fencing and proximity to their playground. However, when filling in the pit was suggested, local mothers complained:

‘Their husbands, or their brothers, or their cousins were the ones who had done the work to make that hole, and it was hard work, and there wasn’t any way of connecting the toilets to the drainage, because they don’t have that service. So [in response to suggestions of filling in the pit] they said, ‘Our work, and the work of our husbands, and our relatives ... it wouldn’t be recognised [by the government], and so ... we’re waiting until the service is installed’.

This relates to the Municipal Government’s formalised, staged process of neighbourhood consolidation through participation. Residents are aware of this, and that sanctions may apply to residents who are seen to be skipping or diverting a stage. They are therefore ‘waiting their turn’ and employing patience as a deliberate strategy, to demonstrate their suitability for government intervention.

Highlighting this, Alicia commented on the residents’ fears about what would happen if they were not patient:

‘Above all, when [the government] finally installs drainage, it won’t support [the residents], because they’ll see that we’re already using the toilet block, and that [the residents] weren’t patient, and they installed a latrine’.

The strategy of waiting patiently, and making do, may be employed in the short term by residents in order to attain their long-term goals. This suggests an awareness of ‘the rules’ set by authorities, but also a means of addressing the complex and paternalistic attitudes of the state. Patience may therefore be a coping strategy (Jeffrey 2010). Other coping strategies such as having two mobile phones (to deal with intermittent electricity and phone charging opportunities), or taking the ‘two-footed car’ (i.e. walking) reveal the pragmatism and good humour with which lack of services are addressed. Indeed, waiting in this way could be seen as resistance: but it is framed by the fear of sanctions, and substandard living conditions. It is a way of attaining future goals by putting up with current hardship, similar to narratives of struggling and suffering, through the use of tactics learned in response to these conditions.

The preceding analysis has revealed contrasts between city-level and neighbourhood-level perceptions of change over time in the city, particularly the disjuncture between popular and official narratives of linear development disrupted by supposedly chaotic

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7 This is set out in the Xalapa Citizen Participation Bylaw, which aims to sustain municipal development through citizen participation, based on ‘co-responsibility’ between residents and municipal authorities, via citizen-led bodies such as patronatos (residents’ boards) and works committees. For a detailed analysis see Lombard (2012).
development, and the multiple temporalities that actually exist in the city. This reveals the dynamic nature of urban informal settlements, in contrast to these marginalising accounts, as well as offering a response to nostalgic perspectives that suggest the decline of Xalapa’s identity in the face of unplanned urbanisation. For residents of colonias populares in Xalapa, talking about time is a way of expressing their claim on the city, part of formulating a specific (hoped-for) place identity, on which basis they can look forward to the imagined future result of their constructive efforts, and thus a means of resisting discursive constructions. However, the conditions in which these places develop are highly constrained, and the ambivalence found in more nuanced responses and practices such as waiting reflects this.

6) Conclusion

This paper suggests that the theorisation of time/space in human geography can be applied to debates on urban informal settlements, informed by a postcolonial agenda, in order to contribute to these debates. Exploring the temporal dimension of urban space through a specific focus on informal neighbourhoods reveals the uneven production of space and time in the urban setting through multiple temporalities. While the local authority and media portray colonias populares in Xalapa as manifestations of dysfunctional urban growth, residents’ perceptions of time in these places suggest their dynamic nature, as forward-looking and creative, rather than temporary or worthless. In a setting where the production of place is by necessity fluid and constantly changing, the temporal dimension is particularly important. Residents’ own narratives show how change over time is a fundamental element of urban informal settlements, and express resistance to marginalising discourses.

Focusing on residents’ senses of time in the context of urban informal settlements reveals potential for resistance to marginalising discourses in two ways. Firstly, the construction of individual and collective identity is based on narratives holding the past, present and future together, framed as a coherent thread through time. Colonias populares are based on continual improvement: just as houses in colonias populares are rarely regarded as finished, so the place that is being made could be seen as never-ending. In these places, the spatial setting expresses the history of the settlement and its residents, in terms of their struggling and suffering, and also hints at potential future aspirations, in terms of hoping and waiting.

Secondly, tactics such as encroachment and waiting, which depend on residents’ ability to be patient over long periods of time, express resistance to the constraints of poverty and uneven power relations which contextualise and sometimes shape their constructive efforts. Temporal accounts may be framed by constraints, expressed as hardship or ambivalence; in order to deal with this, residents use tactics such as patiently waiting for change, while effecting prosaic and often imperceptible changes themselves.

The suggestion that an emphasis on time and multiple temporalities can help us to understand marginalised residents’ experiences of the city thus directly addresses the implicit preoccupation with time in debates over urban informal settlements, suggesting potential themes for further research in this area. One question is why, despite much evidence of the dynamic nature of urban informal settlements, local views of (negative) change have been relatively unchanging. It may be that the
discursive dismissal of specific settlements as ‘temporary’ at the local level translates into wider planning discourses which still see urban informal settlements as a temporary phenomenon more generally. Additionally, different temporalities arising at the neighbourhood level suggest a focus on the micro-politics of multiple temporalities.

To extend this approach further in the urban setting suggests recognising the dynamic and ever-changing nature of cities, which are created and imagined not just by formal processes, but also in a multitude of everyday processes in which citizens are engaged. Postcolonial approaches suggest re theorising the city through attention to its prosaic spatialities and temporalities. Foregrounding the temporal dimension of urban informal settlements deepens our understanding of the dynamic character of particular urban places, in terms of seeing them less as ‘transitional’ and more as part of a progressive effort on the part of their residents to construct a place in the city, as well as further extending the scope of theoretical debates on time and space.
Acknowledgements
I am grateful to the residents of Loma Bonita and Moctezuma for offering their time and insights in support of this research. Thanks also to Michael Hebbert for his perceptive comments on an early draft, and to the three anonymous referees for their helpful suggestions. This research on which this article was based was partly supported by a grant from the Economic and Social Research Council.

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